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MARCUS HOLBEACH'S DAUGHTER

MARCUS HOLBEACH'S DAUGHTER

BY

ALICE JONES

AUTHOR OF "BUBBLES WE BUY" AND
"GABRIEL PRAED'S CASTLE"

ILLUSTRATED

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"She looked like a cardinal-bird in her red golfing jersey."
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TO

SIR WILFRED LAURIER

MY FATHER'S FRIEND

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Marcus Holbeach's Daughter

CHAPTER I

SUSPENSE

THE March afternoon sun shone undimmed by cloud-drift above the dormant white Northland. On the rounded hills that sheltered the bay from the outer Gulf, the bronze-green, primeval forest rose somberly, rank on rank against the crystal-clear sky, but over the fields fringing their base, the snow stretched unscarred by snake-fences, or clearing stumps. Winter was nearing its end, and such traces of man's handiwork had long since been covered by successive snow-falls. Below the bluff lay the Basin, a solid white plain, only marked by black lines of *balises,* rows of small spruce trees set up at the beginning of every winter to trace the safest track for man and beast to cross the ice. The tides of the outer bay were also frost-bound, and even from the heights of Cap Rosier, the steep headland fifteen miles out, nothing save solid ice or floes could be seen along the Gaspé coast, and northward toward Anticosti, hidden in its wintry isolation.

It was now four months since the lights on Cap Rouge or Gaspé Head had shone out nightly. The perils of the sea were in abeyance since winter had warned off all trespassers upon her domain.

But even amid this white desolation there were still signs of man holding his own against the Powers of the North. From every unit in the string of scattered pink or white houses edging the road there rose into the still air a steady line of soft blue wood-smoke, telling of plentiful fires in the big French stoves. From the hillsides came the rhythmical ring of axes where men were cutting next year's supply of fuel on their wood-lots, and around the houses, children shouted as they played in the snow or coasted on the well-beaten roads. But over across the Basin, near the stream that in its early summer turbulence supplies the salmon hatchery, was one of the smallest of houses around which echoed no children's voices. Here Mrs. LeRoy lived alone—Mrs. LeRoy, whom some called the wise woman from her skill in the concocting of healing drinks and liniments from wild roots and leaves.

"For sure, 'twas the old squaws as taught her the secret things she knows," said gossips whose families had benefited by her skill, while others, more envious, suggested that her wisdom had an unhallowed source.

Be that as it may, none denied the cures her salves and liniments had wrought, and so far had her fame spread that the fishermen from Mal Baie and Percé and Grand Grêve often came to her instead of to old Dr. McLeod, and before going up to the winter lumber-camps, men called in at the pink cottage for a bottle of cough-mixture, or salve of balsam-fir bark for wounds, to take with them, leaving money to pay for tea and flour and pork, so that the little home was frugally prosperous.

Mrs. LeRoy sat in her living-room, used also in winter as kitchen. It was a not uncheerful place with its well-scrubbed floor strewn with bright-colored hooked mats, and one or two fine skins of caribou and wildcat, its

big red-hearted stove, and its two windows looking down the sunlit slope to the white stretch of Basin. From rows of hooks in the rafters hung bundles of dry herbs, and queerly shaped roots, with outlines suggesting the mummied cats and ibis of old Egypt, shapes at which many a nervous glance was cast by patients, half in awe of the skill they were invoking. On the stove bubbled a big pot, its steam filling the place with aromatic forest scents. In the sunny window hung a cage holding a tawny-breasted robin, and a bright-eyed brown squirrel squatted upright on the dresser's edge watching his owner. Mrs. LeRoy sat before a big frame that held a square of canvas partially covered with an archaic design of oak leaves in red and yellow. Her skill at hooking mats was well known, and she had taken more than one prize at county exhibitions, but now, though her bundle of brightly dyed rags lay beside her, and her puncher was in her hand, her frequent glances toward the window told that her mind was not on her work.

Once or twice she got up and moved restlessly about her small domain, stirring the contents of the kettle or adding a log to the fire.

A large, massive woman of almost masculine strength and build, the features of her impassive face were regular, and though her sixty years had graven deep enough lines of sorrow and care, yet there was no bitterness against the inevitable. Hers was rather the passive acceptance of fate of the brooding monumental figures that watch over the Medicean graves at Florence. Her voice as she spoke to the squirrel was gentle, and he whisked his tail and chattered fearlessly in answer, then returned to the same pose.

"Someone's surely comin'," she muttered. "The squir'l don't listen like that for nothin'." Then, after another

glance from the window: "Sure enough, here she is."

Up the steep slope of the drifts, a girl on snowshoes was speeding with the quick ease of one well used to the exercise. Regardless of the intense cold, Mrs. LeRoy flung her door hospitably wide, letting in the level western sunshine.

"Oh, don't. You'll be frozen!" protested the girl, as she stooped to loosen the soft moose-hide straps binding her slim ankles.

"Me? No cold ever hurt me," was the answer.

Indeed, standing there in her dark blue cotton dress, a little red woolen shawl around her shoulders, the strong frame of the older woman seemed to welcome as a tonic force that sharp breath of boreal air as it swept around her. A handsome black-and-white setter that had followed the girl ran up to fawn on her as a familiar friend, and her hand rested gently on its head, while an almost maternal tenderness softened the gray eyes where lurked the mystical somberness of her Highland forefathers.

"You and Czar fetch the sunlight in with you," she said. "I knew you'd be along to-day. The squir'l's been on the lookout for you."

The door was closed, and Virginia Holbeach glanced round with an air of satisfied familiarity, before she sank into the shabby, big old rocker by the stove. An incongruous figure she seemed in such surroundings, for her sealskin coat that came nearly down to the edge of her short red skirt was of the softest, most lustrous quality, and the little fur cap that rested on her cloudy brown hair had been fashioned by a practiced hand. Not even in Russia are the fur shops more sumptuous than in Quebec and Montreal, and it was easy to see that Virginia's wraps had come from one or the other place. When Mrs. LeRoy had loosened and taken the costly coat with

a lingering touch that betrayed her simple feminine pleasure in the soft fur, the white-and-pink flowered silk lining, the girl's slimness was revealed. Little more than a school-girl she looked, with the alert gravity, the aloofness of some sylvan creature used to solitude in her big hazel eyes. The long, delicate oval of her face glowed with her recent exercise in the sharp air, though hers was a skin ordinarily pale as the wood-flower. She stretched out her moccasined feet toward the stove, with a little contented sigh.

"I knew you'd come to-day," Mrs. LeRoy repeated, still standing and gazing benevolently down on her. "The squir'l's been on the lookout for you."

Virginia laughed in the subdued fashion of one who does not laugh very often.

"Those wise animals of yours will get you burned for a witch some day."

The shadow of an unpleasant recollection darkened the other's face.

"Didn't you know as they call me a witch now?" she asked gravely.

"Do they? What a shame! But it's only some of those ignorant half-breeds down at the Point, isn't it?"

Her words mollified Mrs. LeRoy, whose big frame shook with a reminiscent chuckle. "Look!" she said. "When that Casper Perrin's great fool of a girl was screaming in saterics last week, what does he do but come and ask me to boil a dogwood cross and give her the water to drink, after sayin' what he calls 'sors' over it, to free her from the spell as was cast on her."

For all her air of anxious preoccupation, Virginia listened with relish to the story.

"And what did you tell him?"

Again the silent chuckle.

"I told him all she needed was good food, an' if he wasn't too lazy to feed his own children, he'd go an' trap a rabbit or two to make her some good soup. If that weren't no use, I'd try a sound whipping."

"Oh, Mrs. LeRoy! That big girl!"

"For sure! It's a certain cure for saterics." Then, with an abrupt dropping of the subject: "Well, what's the news?"

They had come to reality now, and the eyes of the older woman met the girl's with a hungry craving almost animal in its intensity, a craving that found small comfort in the latter's sad gaze.

"Nothing. Haven't you any, yet?" Virginia asked with a lingering hope.

"What news should I have?" came the abrupt retort, as Mrs. LeRoy turned away to the stove, and began to stir the kettle vigorously. "You don't mind the smell, do you? I'm boilin' down some balsam-fir bark to make a salve for John Duncan, as has a sore on his leg that don't heal. He's been home from the lumber-camp goin' on two months, an'——"

Here Virginia interrupted; "Mrs. LeRoy, how long is it since you've had any news of Jack?"

The words acted like a spell, and the other turned to confront her, in an outburst of frank despair.

"How long? Months an' months, God knows! But what of that?" with a poor effort at cheerfulness. "They don't have post-offices an' such like things away up there in God's North. There's only lakes an' rocks, an' miseries of trees there for miles an' miles of frozen-up country. Why, ain't I see'd them in my sleep?"

The woman stood motionless, her strong arms fallen to her sides, head thrown slightly back, and eyes fixed in a steady stare from the window, out toward the dark

firs edging the bluish-white shadowed road. Her voice had taken on a monotonous sound, as though she spoke more to herself than to a listener. Virginia somehow knew that she was scarcely conscious of her presence, but, awed as she was, her keen desire for knowledge drove her on to ask in a hushed voice:

"And did you see Jack there?"

The answer came prompt and certain, as a medium might respond in a trance.

"Yes, I see'd him. Trampin', thin an' foot-sore, an' hungry—oh, I feel his hunger gnawing me at nights, like as it was my own! But for all that, he's *alive.* Oh, Jack's *alive,* sure enough."

Her voice died away into a silence broken only by the mingled song of kettle and wood fire. Gradually, the rigidity seemed to pass from the still figure, and as a moan of rising wind sounded around the house, Mrs. LeRoy gave herself a little shake and spoke in her usual voice:

"There's the wind gettin' up, an' Lord knows, it's cold enough without that. I'll het you up a cup of milk, an' you'll eat a doughnut, an' then be on your way home afore the sun gets lower. Didn't Miss Creighton mind your coming by yourself?"

Disappointed at this return to the day's minutiæ, Virginia still felt it prudent to acquiesce in it, answering:

"She never quite likes me to cross the Basin alone. She has so often heard the old doctor's stories about the ice being carried out by the tide while people were still on it."

"They're true enough. I could tell you stories of things I've seen myself. Though Pierre DuChene, as crossed from Grand Grêve yesterday to fetch some of my Injun cucumber-root stuff for his wife, as seems ailin' in her

chest, though he was sayin' as you can't see a glint of open water from the lighthouse on Cape Gaspé, yet still, the old doctor's right. There's always a risk, an' you shouldn't cross alone. Why didn't you bring the Sabine girl?"

Virginia was used to Mrs. LeRoy's conversational curves, and skipped her divergences.

"Esther? But you see I wanted to come by myself, to talk to you—to ask you—Oh, Mrs. LeRoy," with a sudden irrepressible recurrence to her old fear, "you're sure, quite sure, Jack's *alive?*"

As a night panic spreads in an army, the answering terror leaped in the mother's eyes to meet hers. A livid gray dulled her sallow skin.

"What else should he be?" came the fierce question. Then with a new suspicion weakening her voice: "It can't be as Mr. Dorval has heard something up there in Quebec, an' has written for you to come an' what they call break the news to me? For sure, it can't be that?"

Virginia had paled, responsive to her agony.

"No, oh, no! How could you think anything so dreadful?" she protested. "I thought it was so nice to feel he was in Quebec, and would do his best to get us any news there was. I shouldn't wonder if that was what he went for."

"Dessay," Mrs. LeRoy agreed, her outer robe of stoicism readjusted. "I've known him more'n twenty years, good and bad, and, though he ain't one to talk or make a fuss, I never knew him miss a chance of lendin' a neighbor a helpin' hand. But," the cloud shadowing her again, "he ain't God Almighty to see over woods an' lakes, an' barrens—No, if there *is* bad news to come, I'll know it afore he does. I wasn't born of Highland folk for nothing. We see ahead in our family."

She paused, staring into the bubbling pot as though it held futurity's secrets. Then, with an effort, she said:

"Well, it always seems the longest an' the dreariest part of the winter when Mr. Dorval goes off, an' now, I s'pose he won't be back afore the Gulf opens. Lord knows, why should he, when he doesn't have to, an' he with more money comin' to him from that uncle in Europe than he can spend just on his lone self, if he tries from now to Christmas."

"But he's coming back this time," Virginia said eagerly, as though this return must be a good thing for them both. "He told me he'd bring me anything from Montreal that didn't weigh more than five pounds."

"Well, if he's comin', he'd better look sharp to come afore the first thaw. It wasn't more'n a week later than this last year that the mail didn't get through for a fortnight."

Virginia gave a little shudder to such a prospect of isolation, then said hopefully:

"Thank goodness, there's always the telegraph."

"The telegraph ain't for poor folks." Then, dismissing the subject, while her voice softened to solicitude:

"Drink this hot milk now, an' then start off home afore the sun gets lower. See, the mountain's shadow reaches near across the Basin, an' it will be cold enough down there in the shade."

Virginia knew the might of winter's hand well enough to obey promptly, and not many minutes passed before her snow-shoes were strapped on and she and Czar were speeding down the white slope to the Basin. The dog's breath rose in a thick steam, and she felt the frost stinging her eyelids and nostrils, but, for all the cold, it was a world of glowing color, of tropical radiance that surrounded her. The western sky above the mountain pul-

sated with deep rose and vivid sea-green tints only visible at such seasons, while every shadow on the snow stretched a royal violet against its flame-colored contrast. The North wore the saffron bridal robe of her marriage to Winter, and sky and frozen sea shared her glory. Even the dark woods took a russet warmth on their somber greenery.

Mrs. LeRoy sat at her window, with unwontedly idle hands, watching the figures of dog and girl as they emerged from the trees on to the frozen plain, distinct against that open space, first in the rosy glow, then in the violet shadow of the hill that rose behind Lanse Louise.

"The shadow's took them," she murmured dreamily, her eyes following them until they reached the Point, the business center of Lanse Louise. Here, below the bluff, stood the wharves and white fish-stores of the Dorval Company, the Jersey house that for over a hundred years has held under its sway the lower Gulf, from Gaspé and the New Brunswick shore settlements to far-off Cheticamp, near the north of Cape Breton.

She caught a last glimpse of the scarlet wing in Virginia's cap as she climbed the slanting road up the Bluff to the main street, if street it could be called, then with a murmured "Poor child!" turned away to take her kettle off the fire and set aside the contents that were to benefit John Duncan's leg.

CHAPTER II

SABINE'S HOTEL

BY THE time Virginia reached the level of the road, the glory of rose and purple was paling to lemon lights and pale blue shadows. A young moon held her own in the western sky against the dusk creeping up from the outer Gulf spaces of the blue-gray east.

Here and there in the cottages that peered out between their shoveled snowbanks, like children peeping from their bedclothes, shone an orange light. There was no more sound of children's voices in the air. They were all indoors, safe from the cold of the coming night. Only an occasional chime of sleigh-bells or the creak on the hard snow of a belated lumber team broke the frosty stillness.

Presently Virginia paused before a house, larger than the others, standing right on the road instead of back in the garden. Built, like the rest, on the usual Quebec pattern of overhanging gable roof, long French windows and wide veranda, it had, even in this winter time, an air of trim alertness, set with a background of large gray barns and twisted old willows. Across the road the bank sloped steeply, only leaving room for a line of stately firs, between whose dark stems the distant hills showed spectral in the gathering twilight. This house was the well-known hotel that made Lanse Louise such a favorite haunt for sportsmen, such a desired haven for commercial

travellers in their long winter drives. On the veranda steps stood a woman wrapped in high-collared raccoon coat and cap. Though the furs left barely an inch between cap and collar, Virginia seemed in no doubt as to her identity.

"Esther!" she called lightly, and the mere word spoke of affectionate familiarity.

"Why, wherever have you been all by yourself?" was the response, as the other came down the steps to meet her.

Every one about Lanse Louise, and far along the shore to Dalhousie on the Baie de Chaleur, knew Esther Sabine, whose mother had, for seventeen years, kept the hotel in so capable a fashion. There was also a Mr. Sabine, but being of a nervously retiring disposition and invalidish habits—indeed, it was said to be on account of an early breakdown in his health that the family had come to live in this secluded place—he did not count for much save to his daughter. From her childhood the two had been companions, the girl early assuming an oddly protective attitude toward her father. Essentially active in her habits, and taking her full share of her mother's housekeeping cares, she always found time to interest herself in Mr. Sabine's gardening, to help him pot and transplant his treasures, to discuss the theories he loved to propound on the world's events as seen through the daily papers, to follow the fussy course of an idle man's day.

Esther and Virginia had been playmates for nearly as long as they could remember, in spite of many differences in their circumstances. As each grew into girlhood, they could not but be aware of the contrast between their lives.

Though Virginia Holbeach lived at the Bluff House in so secluded a fashion with her governess, Miss Creighton,

yet her surroundings were of a daintiness befitting those of a rich man's only child, and when, in the fishing season, her father came from England, the household habits became less simple.

For her friend there was no such guarded hothouse atmosphere. Before Esther's skirts were long or her hair done up, she had taken her place in the routine of the busy little hotel, and now, in her twenty-third year, the cheerful house atmosphere was largely of her creating. She had also learnt a more difficult lesson than that of work, the lesson of doing without.

It was Mrs. Sabine who held the family purse-strings, and though she never stinted in household matters, in all their personal expenditure she exercised an almost austere economy. With summer boarders, with sportsmen, and all the local travel, the hotel was prosperous, and as she grew old enough to know how steadily the money came in, Esther sometimes wondered where it all went to.

Surely, Mrs. Sabine could not be making a private hoard while she denied her husband the new book on gardening, the experimental plants he craved for, the small luxuries that mean so much to an invalid. She honestly tried not to judge her mother, though she could not but feel that a little of their earnings spent here and there as they went along might have made life more cheerful for them all. Meanwhile, she never grudged Virginia the pretty clothes and trinkets that came to her so lavishly, the winter travel in southern lands, realizing, perhaps, how little she would have cared to have changed places with her, how much better her own more strenuous path suited her nature, than the other's hot-house atmosphere.

"I just went over to Mrs. LeRoy's!"

Virginia's answer had in it a fine assumption of care-

lessness, and she stooped to brush away, with her mittened hand, some of the clogged snow around her ankles.

"Why on earth didn't you get me to go with you?" said Esther in frank surprise. Then, with a little laugh: "I believe you wanted the witch to tell your fortune."

"How can you say anything so unkind!" her friend retorted in swift wrath.

"Why, surely you know I was only in fun!" Esther protested, amazed at such unwonted touchiness.

A jingle of bells came swiftly up the road, and both girls turned their heads to listen. There were not many such silver peals to be heard in Lanse Louise, and to both the sound seemed familiar.

"There's a pair," said Virginia, a tremor of expectation in her voice.

"Why, it's Mr. Dorval!" said Esther, as the two sturdy black horses came on at such a steady trot that soon they saw the low sleigh with its gray-wolf robes, saw the driver, well muffled in astrachan coat and cap.

He evidently saw them, too, for, checking his horses, he jumped out, handing the reins to the man beside him.

"Take them home, David, and don't let them get chilled," he said. Then, greeting the girls in a pleasantly modulated voice with a slight Jersey accent:

"Well, this is an unexpected welcome home for such a cold night! If we had wireless telegraphy, I'd suppose you were waiting for me!"

"Perhaps we scented your coming like the dogs do! Inferior animals, you know," Virginia retorted gayly, a friendly grasp on his arm.

"Well, let's get indoors. I've had enough fresh air between here and Dalhousie. Take off your shoes, Virginia, and we'll run in for a minute."

Esther led the way into the house, the open door send-

ing out a greeting rush of heat and light. Dorval loosened his coat, and took off his cap, showing a black, gray-streaked head, a lean, sallow face of the stag-hound type, nose long but well shaped, level black eyebrows over deep-set gray eyes, eyes full of grave kindliness. Although his forty years sat lightly on him, there were lines around his mouth that told of youthful hardships firmly endured. It was evident that, for all those forty years of his, the two girls and he were good friends—even more, were comrades.

The two followed Esther through a small room, half office, half smoking-room, into the family parlor, a room that by daylight might seem austere in the neatness of its shabby simplicity, but that now, on this bitter winter night, glowed with the fireside cheer of lamp and stove, a cheer enhanced by the contrast of undrawn blinds affording a wide outlook into the mystical northern twilight. The two windows at the end of the room commanded, through a tracery of bare willow branches, a sweep of lemon sky fading into violet, a sky that spanned the deep maroon-purple of the distant Shigshook hills, hills where the world-old forest still shelters its wild creatures in spite of the fringe of lumber camps that gnaw its edges as mice gnaw a cheese. A big old sofa and two well-worn armchairs supplied a certain amount of comfort. There were none of the useless little ornaments so dear to the feminine heart, none of those pictures of old age or childhood, linking the family life with its past, on the walls; but a well-filled, if small, bookcase, a stand of flourishing ferns and geraniums, with work-baskets and newspapers on the center-table, told of a comfortable home life. In one of the armchairs, shoved close to the open French stove where crackled a noble log fire, sat Mr. Sabine. So thin and frail and bleached he looked

with his ivory skin and fine hair, once blond, now whitening, that one might almost have expected the rosy light to shine through him without any obstacle, while his once tall frame was bent as though under the weight of years. There was a startled nervousness in the bright blue eyes he turned toward the opening door, but at sight of his daughter a fresh life seemed to wake in them.

"Ah, Esther!" he murmured in the satisfied voice of a child who sees its mother come.

Further from the fire, between the windows with their sweeping outlook and the table with the lamp, sat the house-mistress, Mrs. Sabine, bending intently over her task of fine darning of table linen, a work which with her seemed to take the place of other women's embroidery. Esther used sometimes to wonder, when her mother came to Lanse Louise seventeen years ago, and the house linen was perhaps new, what occupation she had found for the time she was not going about active housework. Those seventeen years had left few traces on the thick masses of ruddy brown hair, on the somewhat massively modeled face, though all that had made youth, the hope, the frankness, the fire, was forever gone from the deep-set gray eyes and from the mouth whose curves, in their fixed gravity, seemed to have lost the trick of smiling. Some one day in this woman's past there must have been such a supreme effort of self-control that her nature had been hopelessly driven in on itself, or else, perhaps, the self-control had been the effort of years and so had grown into a mask, hiding all that had once been sweetness and even brilliancy. Shadowed as she was, as even a stranger might feel her to be, there was yet the impalpable but very real impress that soul makes on body, of a true, brave nature that, through whatever deep waters, had kept its innate honesty, its inclination toward good rather

than evil. Above all, there were no disfiguring lines of peevish discontent to mar the gravity of her face.

The absolute simplicity of her gray dress had something cloistral in its outlines, though even into its simplicity there crept a touch of distinction, as though this woman had once walked through Vanity Fair with the bravest.

Mrs. Sabine had evidently a keen ear, for, as Esther came into the room, her expectant gaze passed her and rested on Dorval, as though she had recognized his voice and step. As she saw him coming bareheaded toward her, her eyes softened and her lips parted into a flickering smile that was a revelation of former charms, like a late ray of sunshine over a desolate country.

Girls in their first twenties are not apt to mark signs of feeling in middle-aged faces, but those bright blue eyes of Mr. Sabine's went restlessly from one face to another, taking in the full significance of the meeting glances, welcome and response.

With trim precision, Mr. Sabine laid aside the flower-seed catalogue he had been marking with a pencil, while his wife's hands dropped on the heap of white linen on her lap.

"Mr. Dorval!" she said in a voice that, for all its gentleness, had somehow a dead tone in it. "Why, wherever did the girls find you? We did not expect you back until —oh, the spring."

She spoke the last word with the wistfulness of those to whom the six winter months have become such a habit that they almost doubt their ever ending, almost despair of a sight of the blessed brown earth and tawny withered grass, hidden so long under the snowbanks.

"Why, I told you that I shouldn't be away long this

time," he answered as directly to her as though she were alone in the room, coming forward to take her hand with a touch of deference suggesting some far-back courtly French ancestor. Somehow, those meeting hands, both thin and long with tapering fingers, both bearing signs of accomplished tasks, seemed to belong to the same type, a type of latent strength and developed skill.

"Then it was your bells I heard stop at the door? Surely, you haven't just driven through from Dalhousie?" she asked.

"Indeed I have, and enjoyed every mile of the hundred. I only wanted an Englishman with me to show him what our roads and weather can be. I was just one night on the road, which is good traveling. And I found these girls gossiping on the doorstep as though it were a June evening."

Mrs. Sabine looked her greeting to Virginia, who protested lightly:

"Why, I only came across from the Point as you drove up. And, anyway, I'm never cold snow-shoeing."

"The glass is ten below zero now, and goodness knows what it may be before morning," came in a mournful protest from Mr. Sabine, as he shivered in the breath of cold air they had brought in with them.

"And how is the bronchitis?" Dorval asked kindly.

"Bronchial cold, not bronchitis," Mr. Sabine corrected. "It's much better, thank you."

"You had better take off your furs, Virginia," Mrs. Sabine said.

For all the quietness of the words, they held an impression that her husband's bronchial cold was not a desired topic of conversation.

Esther, who had thrown down cap and coat, crossed over to the fire and laid a friendly hand on her father's

shoulder. A pleasant home figure she looked in her trim blue flannel blouse and short dark skirt, her thick chestnut hair drawn back from the square forehead, beneath which the brown eyes looked out frankly. Virginia had flung her coat open, but made no movement to take it off, as she stood there, her eyes fixed on Dorval. The curious sense of expectancy which held them seemed to be intensified in her.

"Thanks, but I must get home or Miss Creighton will be nervous. I only came in to hear Mr. Dorval's news." She hesitated, and Esther put in:

"Which he hasn't told us. You didn't happen to hear anything of Jack LeRoy's expedition, Mr. Dorval?"

The name seemed to break the spell that bound them. As she heard it, Mrs. Sabine's gaze turned inquiringly on her daughter, who somehow seemed conscious of the scrutiny, though her face, tingling from the frost, showed no change of color.

Dorval, too, glanced quickly from one girl to the other, before he answered in the reluctant fashion in which bad news is given:

"I'm sorry to say, I did. I spent Sunday in Quebec, and there I heard what you'll see in Monday's Montreal papers. The Buffalo Company that they were working for has failed, and the provisions promised for the early winter were not forwarded soon enough to reach them. There would be nothing for it but to make for home, though, if a thaw comes early, they may have hard work shoving through in time."

For a moment there was a silence. Then:

"Oh, what a shame, what a shame," Esther cried hotly, "and is there nobody to help them then?"

Eyes, voice, hands were a-thrill with honest indignation. From Virginia came no sound, but, for all the warm

light, her face showed wan, and the eyes fixed on Dorval seemed to grow darker, larger.

"I did what I could," Dorval answered to the unspoken reproach. "I had a talk with the Tathems and some other lumber people, and if the frost doesn't break earlier than usual, we shall manage to get some men through to meet them. There is a good deal of feeling about it in Quebec, and the Government may do something. There are several local men on the expedition."

Each of the three women listening to him knew that he was the originator and prime mover in any attempt at rescue that might be made, but only Esther voiced the knowledge in the grateful words:

"Then, that's what you went to Quebec for!"

"That, and other things!" was the placid response. "But I must be getting home. Mrs. LePine will have my dinner waiting." He looked suggestively at Virginia, who caught her breath with the little shiver of one coming back to actual life from somber visions.

"So must I," she said hurriedly.

After subdued good-nights the two went together from the warm brightness out into the shining splendor of the winter night. The moon had it all her own way now in the west and drew a blue-black tracery of fir branches over the ivory snowbanks. Every cottage light shone an orange stab on the pallid radiance.

Virginia sped swiftly down the veranda steps, and then knelt on one knee to fasten her snowshoes.

"You don't need those for the road. It must be hard as marble," Dorval remonstrated. "I'd drive you home, only the horses will be bedded down by now."

"I'd rather walk," she said briefly, standing her full height, and giving first one foot, then the other, a little shake to adjust them to their moosehide trappings.

"Where are you going?" Dorval asked sharply, as she turned to cross the street to the road that zigzagged down the face of the Bluff to the Point.

She looked back at him as though she had forgotten his presence, and in that white light her face showed spectral.

"I'm going to Mrs. LeRoy. She mustn't read it in the paper or have any of those common people rushing in to tell her."

He checked her with an authoritative hand on her arm.

"Virginia, I couldn't let you cross the ice alone at this time of night. I'm going over there myself as soon as I've had something to eat."

"But you're tired. And then"—there was a break in her voice—"I think I'd be a comfort to her."

"I dare say you would," Dorval agreed soothingly. "But—see here, Virginia—you can surely trust me to do my best. We're old friends, she and I. I was with her when her husband died." With a sudden effort at a more cheerful tone, he added:

"Besides, your going alone at this time of night would alarm her, and we mustn't be in too great a hurry to make a tragedy of this. Jack will get through all right yet."

"Oh, yes," she agreed with a little gasp, as, abandoning her purpose, she turned her face homeward.

They walked in silence, and presently, when they parted, Dorval paused at his own gate to watch her solitary figure in the shining dusk of the road.

"Poor child, so that's the way the wind blows! And she has only that little dictionary of a woman to go back to! Holbeach had better come out this spring and look after her, or she'll be taking matters into her own hands and giving him a surprise!"

CHAPTER III

LADY WARRENDEN'S VILLA

THE Cannes season was nearing its end, and every day the *rapide* bore away groups, indifferent to the spring-tide glory they left behind, only intent, like children, on the next new toy or amusement.

Lady Warrenden's white Moorish villa, sparkling like a bride-cake among its green shrubbery of eucalyptus and bamboo, still shone in undiminished cheerfulness. Lace curtains fluttered at open doors and windows, gay awnings shielded the balconies, and out on her favorite terrace, facing the Esterel peaks and the sunset, were grouped all sorts of fantastically comfortable wicker chairs and convenient little tables. A soul-satisfying place this terrace on crisp winter mornings when the distant Alpes Maritimes glistened in fresh snow, and perhaps even the Esterel peaks were outlined in white; in the glare of hot noontides when the sea below stretched a silky blue plain while the mountains swam in a faint haze, and the sharp tracery of the pepper trees was outlined on the marble pavement, fairest of all perhaps at this pre-sunset hour of the spring afternoon with the sea deepening to violet and the western sky yellowing behind jagged peaks of royal purple.

Familiar as she was with this daily panorama, it yet added to Lady Warrenden's sense of well-being as she sipped her tea with the relish of one fresh from motoring

on a dusty road. A great bank of pink roses formed a background to the white-clad figure whose curves were ampler than they had been ten years ago. The first fine delicacy of her modeled features was slightly blurred in outline by luxurious and strenuous living, and by the cosmetics that made her face a true work of art, fitter in its crudeness for the footlights than for the soft southern twilight, while the glory of ruddy hair, crowned with a wondrous pale green hat, now owed more of its brilliancy to Bond Street than to nature.

For all that, there was enough of the woman's old charm left in the long, heavily-lidded violet-blue eyes, in the way in which her lustrous hair grew around the shell-like ear, in the fashion in which she raised the corners of her mouth in a budding smile, to make Marcus Holbeach, lounging opposite in a deep wicker chair, recall in not too dissatisfied fashion the days of her splendid maturity when she had first subjugated him.

Life had then been a luxurious, careless thing to them both, but now she was wavering in the mid-thirties, and, with all her courageous skill, he could not but mark the waning of her glory, while he—Heavens, did all men of forty-five feel so deadly weary of life, feel so oppressed by their consciousness of futility?

There were men he met daily, men whom he knew to be a good ten years older than himself, who still wrestled for the world's prizes, with, to all appearance, the avidity of their eager twenties. Perhaps the prizes had come to him too early and too easily to be fully valued. Perhaps, in another sense, they had come too late. When he used to enter ballroom or theater in Lady Warrenden's wake, he had been proud of her beauty and of her notoriety as one of the most reckless pleasure-seekers of a reckless set, content to know that his name was coupled with hers

by the crowd. Now, he sometimes found himself wondering if that crowd pitied him for the weakness that kept him her property, the purveyor of her extravagant amusements.

None of these thoughts was legible on his impassively well-bred face as he watched her still nibbling at dainty biscuits though he himself had got to the cigarette stage. All the same, to her keenly trained perceptions the atmosphere of his mental weariness may have made itself felt as a warning note.

"This perpetual tearing about in motors in all the dust and glare must be ruination to one's looks," she grumbled. "I think that when I get back to England, I'll forswear the things and only use horses. It would be rather a chic idea. Motors are getting too common."

"We'll have up the four-in-hand in town," he agreed somewhat absently. "By the bye, when do you think of going north?"

A flicker of watchful violet eyes told that the wished-for point of discussion was reached.

"Easter is late this year and will be just right for Paris. I shall want a week or so there to see about clothes. The early races would be on, too. After that, one might as well get back to town. How would that suit you?" she asked, with promptitude which revealed a mental rehearsal.

"Perfectly," he agreed politely. "From then to the end of May would give me enough of it."

The elaborate unconsciousness of the remark presaged a doubt as to its reception.

"Enough of what?" she asked tartly.

"Of town and its never ending scrimmage. I tire of it sooner than I used to."

"I'm glad I don't tire of things," she commented. "But

if you give up town, what are you going to put in its place? Norway? I don't mind going if you'll only wait till the middle of June, though I doubt if even then we should get together a decent party. No one wants to miss Ascot."

"There's no need for you to miss Ascot. As for me, I'm starting for my Canadian river on the second of June."

It was what Lady Warrenden had feared, but her dismay at being deserted in the midst of the London season was none the less keen for that. She had made so sure that last year's yachting on the Norway coast had broken up his tiresome years-old habit of vanishing into the western wilderness for the better part of the summer, a habit which she always felt as an annually recurring threat to her supremacy. Under the influence of this dismay she walked wearily and restrained her temper.

"Canada! And I had been so counting on the Norwegian cruise. Don't you remember how we talked of going on to Finland and St. Petersburg this time?"

Her voice was musical and her wonderful violet eyes pleaded for her own way.

Remembering how often she had thus won it, he hardened his heart, and made steady answer:

"I must not neglect my own river this year. If one stays away too long, things are sure to go wrong. But there's no reason you shouldn't go to Norway if you want to. If I chartered a yacht, Darvell would be only too glad to go and run things for you. You could take four or five people."

It was not the first time that he had thus, in lazy cynicism, purchased his liberty from her, but the mortification of it stung, nevertheless.

"I shouldn't care to go without you," she murmured with pathos.

Leaning back in her chair, she reached out one hand to grasp a drooping spray of roses, while with the other she deliberately pulled off the leaves and scattered them on the black and white tiled pavement. There was something feline in the action and the nervous contraction of Holbeach's eyebrows told that it grated on him. He remembered a woman who never touched a flower save caressingly. As the last rose leaves within reach fell, she looked up with a smile wherein lurked mischief.

"I've generally found you a pretty good judge of what was enjoyable, so suppose I were to try the Canadian forests and their secret of youth. I needn't stay all the time on your river unless I liked it. There must be lots of other places to go to."

She had learnt what she wanted to know. She had guessed it before, now she was certain that he had some reason for not letting her approach his hidden Paradise. That reason she felt sure was a woman. His start, his vexed laugh as he flicked the ash from his cigarette, betrayed him.

"You wouldn't stay over one night, I'll take my oath," he asserted.

"Why not?"

"You would never stand the black-flies. An hour of them would reduce your complexion to a magnificent ruin. Even mosquitoes are a joke to them."

"I could wear a veil."

"No veil can keep them out. They are in your ears, hair, everywhere."

"How do you stand them then?" she retorted.

"We smoke strong tobacco and smear our faces with

a mixture of tar and pennyroyal. How would you like that?"

"Horrors!" she shivered. "But you only have those flies in the woods, don't you? There must be some civilized watering-places with hotels where I could stay for a bit, aren't there? The novelty of it would amuse me, I'm sure."

Knowing her keen vitality, her avidity for new impressions, he realized the emergency that threatened, and, praying that she might never hear of the beauty and comfort of the hotel that from the cliffs of Quebec overlooks the St. Lawrence, he lied skilfully and boldly.

"There are watering-places, I believe, with great, bare caravanseries of hotels crowded with women and children, such a thing as a man never being seen between Monday and Saturday. I can bear testimony to the July exodus from Canadian cities, it having been my fate once or twice to travel down the Gulf by boat or train just when it was at its height. Both boat and train literally overflowed with children. One could hardly help stepping on them. And babies! Never did I hear such a chorus of babies as one stuffy night in the Pullman going down from Quebec. From what I saw, Canada need not fear race suicide."

"Heavens!" she shuddered, but he went on remorselessly:

"The families that don't put up in hotels have little pink and white wooden cottages along the shores, and seem to live an amphibious, picnic sort of life, often without any servants at all—" Here he paused to contemplate his work.

"It sounds awful," she admitted. "But there must be some people without babies."

He was inexorable.

"If there are, they don't seem to count in the scheme of existence, *là bas.*"

She made no further protest, but with a sudden change of tactics began:

"I daresay it would be more in my line to accept Mrs. Darcy-Huyster's invitation to go out to Newport with her after Ascot. She has a gorgeous villa there, you know, and they say she does things regardless. When you had enough of your black-flies and salmon you could come there and get civilized. It's not far, is it?"

No sooner had Holbeach disposed of one peril than another loomed up.

"About the distance of London to Algiers," he replied. Then, after a moment's hesitation: "But I doubt if I shall be in any hurry to get back to civilization and Mrs. Darcy-Huyster. I thought of ending the summer with a cruise along the north shore of the Gulf toward Labrador. An old friend of mine in Quebec has always wanted me to go with him."

"And any society would evidently be more to your taste than mine," she said, rising in a swift flash of temper that sent her parasol clattering to the pavement, its yellow tortoise-shell handle shivered to bits. Shoving it aside impatiently with her foot she moved forward to the heavy stone coping and stood there staring down through the veiling trees at the carriages and motor cars passing on the boulevard below. The revealed glories of mountain, sea, and sky could not draw one glance from the beautiful, angry eyes.

In earlier days, Mr. Holbeach had been amused by such childish ebullitions of temper and had been too apt to yield the disputed point. To-day, for some reason, it vexed him and fixed his purpose. With a sudden resolution of movement he rose and joined her, showing a tall

figure, still slim and alert in its careful tailoring. With folded arms he leant against the pilaster of a flower vase, and steadily contemplated the half-averted face and figure.

"See here, Violet, what's the good of this?" he began in low, even tones. "Last year I let you persuade me into following your ideas instead of my own. This year I've made my plans to go out to my river as usual, and, as usual, I intend to go alone. One can't go dragging a mixed-up party all that distance, and it would be mere folly for you to come off there alone with me at this time of day. People aren't going to stand everything, you know, and it might turn out awkward for you if your brother and his wife were to give you the cold shoulder."

The knell of her waning power sounded clear to her in every word he spoke, but she was too subtle to give him the chance by any reproach of hers of putting it into more tangible form. Quick to realize that this was no moment for temper, she looked up at him with quivering smile and misty eyes, murmuring softly:

"Forgive me if I seem exacting. It is only that I know I shall be so lonely, so—well, how can I help fancying that you may forget me, that some younger, fresher woman may take my place with you?"

His laugh both reassured and frightened her, reassured because it told her that there was no woman-magnet drawing him, frightened, because she saw that she had made him really angry. For all his endurance of her moods, she was keen enough to know that a certain cynical laziness rather than a lack of moral courage was its cause, a cause that might snap under too hard pressure. The anger passed without further manifestation than the cold remark:

"I should keep such vivid powers of imagination for

the designing of your frocks, if I were you. And now, if you will excuse me, I will stroll back to the hotel. We are dining on board Thorold's yacht, you remember."

"Yes," she murmured, relieved at the ending of the interview. Some other day she would return to the charge, and try to keep him from the renewal of the yearly expedition which she intuitively recognized as an antagonistic element. There was something, someone out there that drew him away from her, that stood between them even when he was with her. It was a matter of life or death to this woman, who so loved the world and its luxuries, to keep her hold on this rich man, with no visible ties save the nephew whom he had brought up as his heir.

"I must try to pump Giles when I see him," she murmured, as she went upstairs to rest in preparation for the evening.

Strolling down the broad white boulevard that now lay in blue-gray shadow, Marcus Holbeach pondered in bitterness of spirit:

"Poor Violet! She somehow guesses that her fate hangs in the balance. If Giles will do as I wish, and bring my little girl to England, I must, in fairness to them, become a pillar of respectability. And yet, isn't it too late, and doesn't Violet suit me best after all? Well, it's in the lap of the gods."

Summing up thus, he entered the palm-shadowed gates of one of Cannes' great white hotel-palaces.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHATEAUGUAY

LANSE LOUISE had awakened from its six months' sleep between the mystery of forest-clad hills and the solitude of ice-bound bay and outer Gulf. The open water was once more radiantly responsive to each change of sky and wind. The dark, forested hill-tops were unflecked by snow, though in shadowed northern valleys an occasional gray remnant of a great drift still lingered. These last traces of winter served only to accentuate the stir of woodland life.

Great flocks of wild geese passed over, flying north, honking as they went, and robins sang in every clearing, while "poor Tom Kennedy's" mournful call came bell-like from the woods. Out on Cap Rosier and Ship Head and down on the long shoal in the curve of the Bay, the lighthouses once more sparkled at night, telling that the Gulf's great highway was open.

Already, the season being early, several forerunners of half a continent's traffic had passed up toward the distant cities, and the first down boat from Quebec was now due.

The big lumber mills at St. Majorique and the Barachois had commenced work on the first logs of the season, humming like a hive of bees and sending up their clouds of fragrant blue smoke to cling to the hillsides as though the souls of the sacrificed trees were seeking in

death to rejoin their comrades, still erect in somber ranks. For all the austerity of the northland, the gloom of its endless forests, the storm-beat spaces of its great Gulf, there was an air of homely cheerfulness over Lanse Louise as its scattered string of tin-roofed houses blinked in the May sunshine. On the fields that crept up the slope behind the houses to meet the squares of woodland lots where the young spruce were growing up in place of the sacrificed hardwood, men were already beginning to plow for their crops of potatoes and oats, their few late vegetables.

That line of houses and those small clearings are about the only change in the outward aspect of things since the summer days nearly four hundred years ago, when Jacques Cartier, sailing westward into unknown seas, planted a cross on the point out there that still bears the name of French Bluff. Since then, French and English have voyaged past, to wage war against each other and the Indians, to make themselves homes, to build cities, cut down forests, plow the prairies, lay railways, reaching to the further seas, to found a new nation, but these Gulf shores have remained the abode of a few fishermen and the Jersey traders who buy their fish and supply their needs from great store-houses, remained the haunt of lumbermen who hew down the forests in winter and in summer work the mills that prepare the timber for shipping.

Of later years these regions have known new frequenters, the rich Americans or Canadians who lease from the Government the salmon rivers, building comfortable camps for themselves even up on the distant North Shore. The month of June brings these lucky beings either in yachts or by mail-boat, and welcome they are for the money they spend and the employment they

give to a set of men versed in the lore of forest and stream. Autumn has its own excitement of the arrival of hunting parties bound for the inland fastnesses of moose and caribou and red deer, and, though the holiday crowd of tourists passes by more trodden routes, every summer sees a certain number of quietly busy folk, naturalists, geologists, botanists, all come to study these out-of-the-way regions. But on this sunny May afternoon no stranger from the outside world beyond the energetic commercial traveler had as yet broken in upon the winter seclusion of Lanse Louise.

There was, however, a perceptible air of expectation over the village. A little group of men and boys loitered about the post-office whence came telegraphic news of the outside world; buckboards covered with country mud drove up and down the steep winding road that led to the wharves and stores on the Point, the business center of the place. It was here that the steamers and coasting vessels moored. Here stood the big white store of the Dorval Company, the Jersey house that rules the Gulf from Cape Breton to Gaspé with a patriarchal hand, stores where everything, from a sailor's mattress down to Jersey cologne and French chocolate, could be bought from pleasant-mannered Jersey boys, gentlemen's sons, apprentices in the old fashion to the big firm. These boys lived with Paul Dorval, the partner, who had for years made his home in Lanse Louise and it was the great bell at his house on the hill that, ringing to call them up to their meals, gave the time to the village.

Dorval seemed not to have escaped the contagion of restlessness in the air, for he was pacing the end of his wharf, pausing every now and then to stare over toward the long curve of the outer Bay, landlocked between its hills.

Presently, his attention was caught by a ferry-boat leaving the opposite point of the Basin, narrowed here at its mouth. In its stern sat Esther Sabine and Virginia Holbeach, and recognizing them, he strolled over to the ferry steps to meet them.

Lightly balancing themselves, as those used to tossing craft, the girls left the boat and scrambled up the steps to join him. Both wore the short serge skirts and trim jackets suited to country rambles, but Virginia's attire was of a cut and material that bespoke a fashionable tailor, while Esther's suggested an order by mail to one of the Montreal cheap department stores. Their hair was loosened under their caps by the soft west wind, and an indescribable breath of youth and spring seemed to Dorval to encompass them.

Each was laden with clusters of mayflower, the sweet-scented trailing arbutus that brings the first breath of flowers to northern lands. Is there anyone who, as a child, has crouched in the still, bare woods to scatter last year's withered leaves and draw out from their shelter the first mayflower, fragrant and rosy like a fresh hope, to whom it is not through life the flower of flowers? In later years, we may gather English primroses and blue-bells, Mediterranean anemones and heath, but to us of the Northland the mayflower is ever the blossom of youth, of memory, of the beloved dead.

Virginia hugged her spoil in a great, straggling mass within one arm, but Esther's was trimly stowed away in a basket she carried.

"So you've been to the woods?" was Dorval's greeting as he turned to walk beside them.

"Only up the bank behind the salmon hatchery," Esther answered. "The mayflowers are always so pink there in the shade. But that was an afterthought. We

really went to Mrs. LeRoy's because mother wanted to send her some brawn."

"For the feast of the Prodigal Son? Brawn is made of veal, I believe?" Dorval asked with the careless jest of one who is in an excellent humor.

Virginia turned on him, her face flushing vividly, as clear colorless skins do flush, and said impulsively:

"Why should you call Jack LeRoy a Prodigal Son? Failure is no disgrace, if you have done your best."

"And all Jack's friends know that he has done that—in fact, that he's a bit of a hero, don't we?" he mollified her with an indulgent smile.

Long ago, when Virginia was in very short frocks, Dorval had fallen into the semi-paternal attitude of a youthful guardian toward her, and, indeed, it was he to whom, in Mr. Holbeach's absence, all business matters at the Bluff House were referred.

"Jack is a lucky fellow at any rate in having such stanch friends," he added good-naturedly. "By the bye, did you know that the *Chateauguay* passed Cap Rosier an hour ago, and should be in sight at any time now? I suppose you're going to wait down here with me and see her come in?"

"Oh, no, I think not," Virginia said with a flurried glance of appeal at her friend, a glance in which longing was mixed with a certain new shyness.

"Now you know you men like the first turn at all our excitements to yourself, so we'll be modest and leave you a clear field. Come along, Virginia," Esther said with cheerful decision.

As Dorval watched them climb the Bluff, he shook his head, muttering:

"Whatever comes of it, it will be no use Holbeach blaming me. I couldn't have left Hector LeRoy's boy

to starve in the wilderness without having a try at getting him out."

Reaching the hotel door, Esther paused:

"I suppose I ought to go in," she said wistfully, for the outdoors expectation appealed to her, and hers was a nature that loved life.

But Virginia held her arm and pleaded:

"Ah, no! It's early yet. Come on with me as far as the French church, and we'll watch the steamer from there. It's so stupid to be always doing your duty."

"Nobody knows that better than I do, so I might as well come," Esther agreed, and they went on their way down the village street.

Out on a jutting spur of the Bluff it stood, the little white wooden church, with its tin-roofed belfry and great gaunt black cross seen from far down the Bay, standing among the few graves wreathed with blackberry vines, and spring's first grasses. Two old fir trees rose monumentally stiff and straight between the church and the cliff's edge, and beneath these was stacked the wood-pile for the warming of the faithful. Perhaps one reason why winter in Lanse Louise was robbed of its sordid terrors, was this abundance of wood, splendid wood that suggested a glowing mass of logs. Even if everyone had not owned his separate wood-lot, if they could not buy a sledge-load for a merely nominal sum, were there not great logs and twisted tree-roots heaped along the river banks and the shores, gray and weather-beaten, ready for burning?

As the girls reached the little gate in the white paling fence, Virginia looked seaward. Yes, there it was, dim but unmistakable, the white trail of smoke against the blue of the distant shore, the flutter of a red flag in

the sunshine, and, to make matters sure, the hoot of a warning whistle. The *Chateauguay* was in sight.

"Oh, there she is! Come over here!" Virginia said, leading the way across the short grass behind the church.

A few logs had been taken from the wood-pile to form a seat under the firs, and here they sat down without speaking, each for the time absorbed in the watch. The later afternoon light was deepening in tone, the tide was out, and over the shallow flats beneath them the reflections lay rich bronze green, only broken when a black cormorant flapped heavily down from his perch on one of the net-stakes to dive after a fish or skim away over the water with a hoarse cry. The stillness was cheerful with its sense of sunny repose, of coming action.

It was Esther who spoke first.

"I wonder how many years I've come here in November to watch the last boat go, and in May to hail its advent. Every time I see it disappearing down the Bay it seems to me that the devil shows me a panorama of bright town streets and theaters on winter nights, and sunny mornings with dry sidewalks when well-dressed women walk about to beautiful shops full of clothes, and flowers and pictures—all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. And then, when she gets to the lighthouse, the steamer gives that last whistle that sounds as though it were mocking one, and I just defy the devil and go home to face the six months. Well, this winter is over, at any rate."

"Yes, it's over," Virginia echoed with a thrill in her voice, her eyes never wandering from that red speck of flag momentarily growing larger.

Esther went on talking, perhaps with the object of diverting her friend's attention, perhaps just idly, as one talks when with a habitual companion.

"Last November it didn't seem so forlorn when you were here with me. Do you remember my asking if you weren't just a bit sorry that you had chosen to stay, and you said no?"

"And I wasn't, and never have been," Virginia said reflectively. "It was ever so much nicer being here in our own cozy home than it would have been hanging about those big, noisy Florida or California hotels where I always feel so lonely. Everyone save me seems to have so many friends. The time was much shorter that way."

Her friend gave her a quick inquiring glance, as though something in the words caught her notice.

"Shorter?" she protested. "But I don't want time to be shorter. I want to get all I can into it, and not have the best of life slipping away in these months of hibernating that don't leave one a single thing to remember. Just think, has any one thing really happened between now and last November?" Virginia, her eyes always fixed on the approaching steamer, answered somewhat absently:

"Nothing startling, perhaps. Still there were all those sunny mornings, those wonderful moonlight nights, the drives over the frozen rivers, the snowshoe tramps through the woods. Surely, they didn't make up a bad whole, did they?"

"You sound like a nature writer in the *Saturday Montreal Star*. But, of course, it might have been worse and I'm a fool to grumble, especially when it's over, and here comes the beginning of a new chapter."

It was the other's turn to look as though the words had a private meaning to her.

"A new chapter?" she repeated. Then with a sad little laugh: "I doubt if it's much of a new chapter for poor Jack."

"Who knows?" Esther protested cheerfully. "He's

young and strong, and he's come back safe; that's the main thing."

"Perhaps he isn't so strong after all that he went through," Virginia insisted, a tremor in her voice. "Long days carrying loads through the woods on starvation food doesn't make men strong. Oh—whether that hateful syndicate had failed or not, some of them might at least have got the provisions sent up to them as they promised. *They* didn't go hungry, you may be sure."

Esther was watching this earnestness with a troubled look, and again tried to strike a lighter note:

"Well, it was all right in the end, thanks to Mr. Dorval and the Tathems, and Jack isn't hungry *now*, you may trust Captain Loisons for that. See how near the steamer is. He can make out the houses now, will soon be able to see us." Virginia had moved forward to the edge of the Bluff, where she stood, all her heart in her eyes. Presently she spoke without looking round:

"Do you see that man on the bridge with the Captain? That's Jack."

Esther looked and, only seeing one black figure like another, wondered how she could distinguish him.

"Let us wave to him," was all she said.

But Virginia checked her hand. "Oh, don't! At least—perhaps he'd rather we weren't watching him. See, one or two boats have sailed out to meet them. There, they're cheering him! So you see Jack has a welcome, at any rate," she added jubilantly.

"Of course, he would have. Well, if we're not to wave, we had better be going home—at least, I must. Mother always has everything ready in case anyone should come in the boat; still, there's apt to be something to see to at the last."

At the churchyard gate the girls parted, going differ-

ent ways. Esther turned back toward the square yellow house and her duties there, and Virginia went on up the country road to where on its sloping hill stood the most dignified dwelling in Lanse Louise, the Bluff House, where she and Miss Creighton, her former governess and present housekeeper and chaperon, lived alone in a sort of stately seclusion.

CHAPTER V

THE FATTED CALF

MORE than one new red flag waved over Lanse Louise the day the *Chateauguay* came, but the newest and brightest and smallest flaunted over the little pink cottage across the Basin.

And the flag was not the only sign of festivity. Over the door had been nailed a great branch of hemlock from which fluttered little bows of red ribbon. These bows, having seen service on a dressing-gown of Virginia's, had been passed on to her old friend for the making of hooked mats, and pressed by Mrs. LeRoy's color-loving soul into the service of decoration.

Indoors, the living-room was bowery with the green ferns and creepers that had lived out the winter under the snow, with great dishes of fragrant mayflowers, while even the robin's cage had a crown of green and the squirrel was brave in a red bow which he had nearly scratched off.

In the middle of the room the table, covered with a coarse white cloth, was set out in unwonted splendor.

In the center stood a frosted cake on which the words "Welcome Home" had been daintily picked out in pink. Mrs. Sabine's mold of brawn had been adorned with cubes of carrot and beetroot, and two little common glass saucers held rosy jam.

For an hour or more Mrs. LeRoy had restlessly paced

the garden path. Her usual dark blue cotton was freshly starched, and her still abundant grizzled hair neatly smoothed. In her hand she held her dearest possession, a pair of battered old opera-glasses, through which she had watched the *Chateauguay* curve in to the wharf.

"They're cheering Jack! For sure, they're cheering Jack!" she had muttered with trembling lips when the boats put out to meet the steamer.

At last came the supreme moment when she saw a canoe leave the Dorval wharf. There was but one man in it, and he sent the little craft springing through the water with long, swift strokes. She would have known those strokes anywhere.

"If that ain't him all over!" she gasped aloud in the fashion of the solitary. "He's taken Mr. Dorval's own spick an' span an' shiny canoe. No dug-outs for him! He'll allays have the best that's goin', just like his pa. Well, it's a queer thing to think as the son of a rough, old thing like me should be born a gentleman, for gentleman he is, though he's poor now."

There was an ecstatic pause of silent watching, then as a skilful paddle stroke rounded the canoe in to the landing, and she saw the big agile figure spring out and, balancing itself on the jetty, wave a hand toward her, she breathed:

"Oh, ain't he just beautiful in them new clothes!"

"Here I am, mother!" called a familiar voice, and then tears dimmed the hunger of her eyes until her arms were around him, and her broken voice murmured thanks to God.

It was one of the sacred moments of life to both mother and son. When her hands dropped from his neck she held him off to feed her gaze on him.

Then she saw how the new suit from Quebec she had admired a moment ago hung loose on his gaunt frame. There were hollows in his cheeks, too, and all the joyful excitement of the home-coming had failed to banish the somber shadow from his eyes, the shadow of fear.

It was now nearly a year since Jack LeRoy had eagerly seized the chance of joining as timber expert an expedition sent by an American company to take possession of forest limits in northern Quebec. The leader had been badly chosen, the outfit carelessly supplied, and things had gone badly from the first, so that in mid-winter, when, instead of the promised supplies, word of the company's failure had reached them, matters looked grim enough.

Their leader died and Jack was chosen by vote to take command of the forlorn little band and guide it back to safety before provisions should give out altogether.

Thanks to Dorval's timely aid, the task had been accomplished—but at what cost the new lines around his mouth, the almost stern gravity of his face partly told. He had wrestled with the Wilderness and the Powers of the North, and had come off with life, but something precious, something of youth and hope had been left behind.

Not that he was not, even now, a fine specimen of stalwart young manhood. In his big, fair bulk, Jack LeRoy was as thorough a Norman as though his father's family had not dwelt for two hundred years in Jersey, before its profitless scion had turned his handsome face westward in the employ of one of the big companies; as though his mother had not come of Highland stock; as though he himself had not been born in Lanse Louise, and never, though he had wandered far, been beyond the bounds of Canada.

"Lord bless us, but you're a skeleton!" Mrs. LeRoy gasped. Jack laughed away a tendency to choke.

"Oh, come, not as bad as that. I'll soon fill out," he said; then looking into the worn old face, asked gently:

"Were you frightened, mother, when you didn't hear for so long?"

But the imputation was stoutly denied.

"Not me! For I *seed* you at nights, trampin' through the woods, starved to a shadow, but with the life in you. It was the others as was scared, not me."

"What others?"

"Well, the time that Mr. Dorval went to Quebec to see about you, there was a bitter cold day when the nails was poppin' in the walls, an' your eyelids would have fruz if you winked them, an' that child Virginny comes snowshoein' over here by her lone with Czar . . ."

Jack knew his mother's trick of wrapping a grain of information in a covering of many words and broke through it ruthlessly.

"Virginia! How came she to be here in the winter time? Is she here now?"

"She comed to be here in the winter time 'cos she asked her pa to let her; said, like the wise girl she is, as she was tired hangin' round them big hotels where they shoot people up an' down in cages as though the Lord hadn't given them legs to walk with. An' more'n that, she's in Lanse Louise now, an' was here in this very house not more'n an hour ago, and brought a fine frosted cake with 'Welcome' on it in beautiful pink letters. Come and see."

Her hand on his arm, she drew him in, and stood before the results of her toil, a proud woman, watching his face.

"And she put them mayflowers round it, too."

"God bless her!" Jack muttered in his throat, while one big, roughened hand reached out and gently fingered the flowers.

But Mrs. LeRoy must give credit to all.

"Yes, and Esther Sabine comed along with her, and fetched that mold of brawn from her mother, and, I must say, if there is a woman in Lanse Louise as can make better brawn that I can meself, it's Mrs. Sabine."

Jack drew a deep breath as he looked around on the familiar little room, as one who had seen it in a vision when hopes were slim of ever looking on it again in the flesh.

"Well, I never guessed they'd all make such a fuss over me when I come back a failure," he said in a somewhat dazed fashion.

But this was too much for his mother to allow.

"You've come back with a good record an' them men's lives to your score. Money's a poor thing beside that."

He flushed a bit as though there was something hard to say.

"But, mother, you understand that I've come with nothing but the clothes I stand in, and them down to Mr. Dorval's account in Quebec."

The big hand rested gently on his shoulder.

"I wouldn't have cared if you' come naked as you were born, save for decency's sake, an' maybe catchin' cold, so long as you come."

Even with this startling mental picture before him Jack still looked grave.

"But—you know I expected to be sending money home to you. How've you managed, mother? Did Mr. Dorval . . ."

Mrs. LeRoy's chuckling little laugh broke in.

"Mr. Dorval! I never needed Mr. Dorval, though

that's not to say as he wouldn't allays be a cheerful giver, the Lord bless him!"

"Well, but tell me how you managed," Jack persisted, and, with a satisfied smile, his mother condescended to details.

"I managed just the same as I did in the years before you'd got your learning to go timber-scaling. While babies keeps comin' into the world, an' sick folk goin' out, I guess my hands won't often be idle. An' they're allays paid for it, too, more or less, mostly less, like when Jules Simon's wife has her sixteenth baby an' he brings me three eels an' a lobster! 'Well, for the sixteenth you might have run to a codfish,' says I—and he was mean enough to say as codfish was common, though I won't deny as the eels was good enough eatin', when I'd stewed them the French way."

Drawing a deep breath she went on:

"Then, my pullets allays lays a good month afore anyone else's, the reason why, I'm not sparin' in hot drinks an' Mr. Dorval allays sends me his oyster shells for them, an' Mrs. Sabine takes all the eggs an' thankful, an' the summer folk hev got into the way of buying my jams an' pickles, an' my tuft-work strips as they call portairs . . ."

"But those are all such small things!" Jack put in, stemming the slow, steady stream.

" 'Small things!' Eggs an' jam! Well then, don't you know that the shore people keep comin' something wonderful all the way from Douglastown an' Percé to buy my cures? They can't have enough of salve of hare's fat and wintergreen oil for their rheumatics, an' balsam fir buds in rum for colds, an' flour of the yellow pond lily roots for the poor dwindlin' babies' stomachs in August, an' . . ."

Here Jack broke out into a laugh in which she heard the old echo.

"Mother, you're twice the man I am! Set you down at the North Pole and you'd grub up something. Next time I go on a trip I think I'd better take you along, too."

The deep-set gray eyes twinkled.

" 'Deed an' you might do worse! 'Tany rate, I'd see you didn't starve!" she triumphed. Then returning to facts: "But here I'm jabberin' like a Newfoun'lander when you haven't as much as sot down nor taken bite nor sup. Go an' wash and we'll have tea. The kettle's boilin' and I'll just do you some ham an' eggs for a beginnin'."

In her proud old soul she felt that no gift of friend or neighbor must take the place of her own work at that sacramental meal.

Jack had laughed, but he felt a bit choky again when, having climbed to his little attic room, he saw that even here there were traces of the patient love that had worked and waited for his home-coming. On the bed was a new red and white patchwork quilt, on the floor a resplendent hooked mat.

Spread out on the quilt was a humble little home-made outfit. Three pairs of knitted socks, a dark blue jersey, two white shirts and two of flannel, and a little pile of coarse handkerchiefs were nothing very grand if he had not understood the toil and saving they represented. More than all, on the pillow were pinned two five-dollar notes.

"Well, if she isn't a brick!" he muttered. Then, under his breath, but with full purpose: " 'Fore God, I'll make it up to her some day!"

CHAPTER VI

FRIENDS

THE groups that greeted the steamboat's arrival had scattered, but though the late sun had sunk behind the mountain, buckboards still drove up and down the slanting road to the Point, and the rattle of the *Chateauguay's* donkey-engine filled the air with unaccustomed sound.

Here and there a stranger was to be met on the village street, and on the veranda of Sabine's Hotel dark, bustling commercial travelers from Quebec smoked and talked with their friends. Unlike their sleek city brethren, these men were bronzed and hardened by long winter drives and summer voyages about the Gulf.

Even the back parlor at the hotel was stirred out of its winter monotony in expectation of Captain Loisons' usual visit. In due time he appeared, the sturdy little Frenchman, red and wrinkled as a late winter apple, greeting the family in the careful English he aired to his summer tourists.

For years Captain Loisons had sailed the Gulf in summer, first as pilot, later as captain of the *Chateauguay*. His winters in Quebec, where his wife kept a boarding-house, were spent in poring over old French archives with the object of proving a theory of his own as to Jacques Cartier's stopping places when he first explored the great Gulf. Every tenth man of over fifty in Quebec is intent on some such feat in local history.

Never did the captain fail to pay his evening visit to the Sabines, marking the opening of each season by a little gift for each member of the family.

Esther received a French novel "tout-à-fait convenable pour une jeune fille." Mr. Sabine was made happy with a package of the seeds of a wonderful new Indian corn which that bugbear of the Gulf, Monsieur Menier, the chocolate king of Anticosti, had acclimatized in his island domains.

"And if it can grow in that boreal Anticosti, why not in Lanse Louise?" as the Captain optimistically remarked.

Mrs. Sabine was presented with a bottle of a certain hot sauce, the secret of which was an ancestral treasure in his wife's family ever since its emigration from Anjou to Quebec. For years the Captain had entertained a chivalrous admiration for Mrs. Sabine, "that *grande dame,* capable of every art of the housewife!"

In the winter months, Paul Dorval was an almost nightly visitor for his game of chess with Mr. Sabine, but to-night there was no thought of chess. There was a second visitor whose advent caused a greater stir than Captain Loisons', for there had been days when it seemed unlikely that he would ever again sit by that fireside. Close on Captain Loisons' heels came Jack LeRoy, trim in the new Quebec clothes, but with his gauntness as plain to their friendly eyes as it had been to his mother's.

"There isn't an inch of extra flesh on you. I expected Loisons to do better with you than that," Dorval said with a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, but, my friend, two days are not much! Though if you had seen him in Quebec you would have confessed that I had done something," the Captain protested.

"There is nothing of the boy left in you, Jack," Mrs.

Sabine said with an unwonted touch of effusion, as she held his hand.

Mr. Dorval noticed how her eyes turned to Esther as though the mother were passing him on into her charge, but then he had an old habit of noticing what Mrs. Sabine did or said.

"Well, Jack, how do you like being the hero of the day? We could hear them cheering up here," was Esther's gay greeting.

That greeting might have been more earnest if Esther had not felt sure that her parents and Dorval were weighing its amount of feeling. Middle age is so apt to pair off the most evident couples, heedless of the unexpected affinities that are lurking in readiness to surprise them.

"That was just the boys' fooling," he asserted with shy brusqueness.

Somehow, they all felt that Jack did not wish to be made the central figure to-night, just wanted to sit there among them and feel the familiarity of it all stealing over him like a waking dream.

The May evening was chilly and the logs crackled in the stove close to which Mr. Sabine huddled. Captain Loisons claimed the attention of the fireside group with the latest news from Quebec of the illusive, ever promised, never attained railway planned to join the Gaspé Peninsula to the Intercolonial, the highroad of Eastern Canada.

Esther, basking in this break in the long winter's monotony, sat in one corner of the big, shabby sofa, with Jack near enough for low-toned converse. It was she who did most of the talking, rippling out the items of winter's news, large and small together, knowing that they were all of interest, but so far avoiding the one name that

she felt mattered most. There was a mischievous enjoyment in her sense of power. At last, after a discreet little pause on her part, he spoke:

"I hear you were across at the cottage to-day."

"Yes, Virginia and I took our offerings. I hope you liked them."

"They were splendid," he said with conviction, "though they looked most too pretty to touch. They had only one fault."

"What was that?" she asked, really surprised.

"That you hadn't waited a bit to give me your welcome."

"Oh, we couldn't do that. Your mother had to have you to herself at first."

"Yes, I suppose so," he agreed.

Meeting the wistful questioning of his gaze, she relented.

"We watched you from the French Bluff."

His eager soul flashed to his eyes. "You . . . and Virginia?" he asked softly.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you wave?"

"Oh, we were shy. At least, I wanted to, but Virginia stopped me. She said she knew it was you on the bridge with Captain Loisons.

"Did she? . . . Yes, I was there," and he fell silent, as Esther could see, hugging the thought of it all, like some child's new beloved toy.

Presently Mr. Dorval and Jack left together. They sat for long on the former's veranda, overlooking the Basin and the lights of the *Chateauguay* down at the wharf. The difference of age had not hindered an intimacy between the two men, an intimacy cemented by camp-fire talks in the frosty October nights after a day's moose or

caribou hunt, by vigils in the winter dawn when far out over the ice they sought the air-holes where the wild fowl gathered. Now, in shelter of the friendly twilight, for the hours of real darkness are few at this season in the north, and in the communion of smoking, the old sense of comradeship revived and Jack spoke in snatches, as the spirit moved him, of his year's effort and failure. He spoke without bitterness, though every word told the older man how the iron of unsuccess had entered into his soul. After a pause devoted to their pipes, Dorval put a question that had been much in his mind.

"Have you thought what comes next?"

Jack took his time with the answer.

"What else have I thought of for the last six months? But there ain't much next that I can see round. I was counting that I might fit in somewhere at one of the mills, and went to the York Company's office in Quebec. They were decent enough and said they'd have found me a job if their timber-scalers hadn't been already engaged. Mr. Cross came down in the boat, and promised for sure if any one failed them at the Dartmouth mills he'd remember me."

"And meantime?"

"Meantime, I've got to get to work on something pretty smart, for I've just fifty cents in my pocket, and I'm not going to hang round and eat poor old mother out of house and home, though she'd like nothing better, bless her. And I've got such an appetite, too," he added ruefully.

Paul Dorval had the name of being careful with his money. There was no doubt that he had a full appreciation of its value, perhaps because life had taught him the long slow grind of its attainment, the fact that its pos-

session often stands for liberty and independence, even for self-respect. For all that, his retort was prompt:

"That's nonsense. Of course, I expect to supply you with what you need for the present, until you get on your feet again."

Jack made a deep sound in his throat that might have been a grunt or a chuckle.

"Do you suppose, though I don't say much, I'm fool enough not to know what you've spent already on gettin' our carcasses out of that wilderness up there? I'll come to you when the appetite is up against a void—but before that I'll find some kind of work, somehow. My hands can't have lost their knack of making a Gaspé canoe, anyway. The American yachts bound for the North Shore will be along next month, and they'll want as many as they can get. Better still, why shouldn't I go with one of them as a guide or a guardian? Some of them millionaires would take me fast enough."

Paul could not be sure if he were in earnest or recklessly jesting with fate.

"Of course, they would, and glad to get you—but I think you can do better than that."

"Forty-five dollars a month and unlimited grub sounds good enough to me, just now. Seriously, a three months' job like that might fill up an awkward gap for me. But I needn't go to the North Shore, if there's likely to be any one round here wanting a guardian on the York or St. John. You haven't heard, have you?"

Now the trouble was that Dorval had heard, and did not wish to speak out and thereby encourage this freak. Thus questioned, though, he felt that he had no choice.

"Mr. Holbeach wrote to ask me to find a man to go on his pools beginning next week. He sails for Quebec with a friend on the first of June."

In spite of the shadows, he had the satisfaction of feeling that he had caused a sensation.

Jack sat puffing at his pipe in silence for a moment before he spoke.

"So he is coming out this spring. Didn't come out last year at all, did he?"

"No. He went to Norway with some friends."

Again Jack ruminated, and now his face was somewhat grim and obstinate, if his companion could have seen it clearly.

"Well, next to you, Mr. Holbeach has right along been the best friend I've got. There's no man I'd sooner work for and I'm sure he'd have no objection if he knew I wanted it. So you can take me on without disturbing yourself."

"Nonsense," Dorval objected. "You'll do better than that. Don't be in such a rush. You can surely wait a few days."

"That's just what I can't. I've got to get steadied down and find my bearings. To wake up in the same place and have the same thing to do every day would pull me together sooner than anything. You don't know the grind it was on body and soul keeping those poor half-starved wretches up to work," he broke out fiercely. "There're nights when I go through it all over again, tramping on hungry, through the melting snow, tramping, tramping, wondering if we'd ever get out. You know we only just managed it in time before the ice broke," he added somberly. Then came the sudden peremptory demand: "Well, are you going to give me the job, or must I wait for the North Shore men?"

Dorval saw that it was no use to oppose further his fixed idea.

"I will, if you are determined. But remember, you

are making yourself Mr. Holbeach's paid servant, and may find it uncomfortable."

"I've been worse. I've been slave-driver to blood-suckers who fatten on honest men's lives," was the bitter retort. "I told you we tried to get our rights before we broke up. Well, I went to one of those men's homes in Montreal—a great white marble house, mind you, a regular palace with flowers and pictures in the hall. I didn't get further than that. His girls were having a party. No sign of hard times there, though he was one of the gang who couldn't or wouldn't pay us for our year's work, for our deadly toil and starvation." He paused, then with a visible effort shook off the shadow of that recent past.

"All the same, I've got to forget the whole story, if I'm going to keep my head. These two months on the river will just give me the rest I want, along with a bit of money to start again."

For a moment he puffed at his pipe. Then came the short, shy laugh, so often the prelude to a serious confidence.

"By then I ought to be ready to set out again in search of my fortune."

Dorval was quick to scent the definite hopefulness of the words and to rejoice in it, feeling his faith justified.

"So you've got another card up your sleeve after all?" he said quietly.

"Well, yes—" Jack admitted, half reluctantly. "That is—I've got to keep it quiet, but it's been in my head all along, that p'rhaps it'll be something to make up to you and the Tathems for what you did for us—"

"Never mind that," Dorval put in. "Tell us what it is. Have you found an Eldorado?"

Jack's voice had a touch of awe in it.

"By God! I believe we have!" he breathed fervently. "You see, it's this way. The Company's land ain't much good, leastways, the timber's there all right, but very little of it is near enough to the streams or on hills steep enough for a slide. It'd take a fortune to get it out. But on our way comin' back we made a bit of a circle, hoping to strike an Injun settlement—which we didn't—but our way took us through a queer, God-forsaken sort of a region—rocks, an' bushes, an' small lakes—and an old miner who happened to have come along with us, wanting to see a bit of new country I s'pose, as is the way with them men as get prospectin' into their blood—you've known them?——"

"Yes," Dorval agreed, recalling many a tragedy of lonely life and death.

"Well, he was a decent chap, an' took a great fancy to me, after I doctored him with some of mother's stuff for a sore leg. No matter how dog-tired an' hungry he was, he 'most always manages to chip off a few bits of rock every day. Our last night out he got me off by ourselves after the others were asleep an' shows me a pocketful.

" 'There,' he says, 'I haven't learned much in thirty years a-chippin' at God's rocks, if here isn't the makin' of another Cobalt or Klondike, an' yet p'rhaps I won't be able to get a rich man to take a-holt of it. They have to listen to such a sight of loonies with them tales!'

"Well, we talked half that night, an' we agreed that soon as we'd looked 'round a bit and got together a few dollars for an outfit, we'd go back there together to try our luck. And we'll do it, too," he ended.

Dorval had listened intently.

"And where is the miner now?" he asked.

"He made for Cobalt. We went along together as far as Montreal when I was after those blood-suckers."

"Cobalt's a great center for men on the lookout for such chances. What if he gets someone to take the matter up and leaves you out in the cold?"

"He won't do that. Old Moses is a white man all through. We agreed that we'd both keep our eyes open for any one likely to chip in, but do nothing certain without letting the other know."

"But he has all the specimens?"

"Yes," Jack admitted, conscious of his weak point, but undaunted.

"Does he drink?"

"Not that I know of. 'T any rate, he didn't get on a tear when we reached Quebec like some of them did, and if ever there was a time when a man might——"

"Exactly so. If he didn't then, it doesn't seem as though he ever would. Still, he *might.*"

"That's so."

Both men had seen enough of "the legion that never was listed" to realize the infinite improbabilities of its vagaries.

"And when you spoke of repaying the Tathems and me did you mean by offering us a share in the venture?"

Jack made an impulsive movement.

"Not before I had been back there again, and could say it was a sure thing. To ask you for more would be a queer way to pay you what I owe you, Mr. Dorval," he protested, a hurt sound in his voice.

"It wouldn't be queer to offer to do the hard work that might bring me in a big return. I'd be willing to risk it on your word, Jack," was the kindly answer. "But you're tired now, or you ought to be, and there's plenty

of time to talk this over. It may be a big thing, you know."

"It will be, if only I'm strong enough to handle it. But, as you say, I'd better be getting home now. Mother will be restless."

He rose and stood to fill his last pipe.

"It's silver, I suppose?" Dorval asked.

"Silver, an' copper an' aluminium, an' he thinks it's more'n likely there's gold 'round somewhere."

"Jove!"

"An' it's settled I'm to be guardian?"

The question was simple, but Dorval laughed outright:

"Get along with you for an obstinate beggar! Yes, if you want it."

"I do. That's all right. Well, I guess I'll go an' try what it feels like to sleep in my own bed. Good-night."

Dorval sat listening to the sound of Jack's measured step on the board side-walk and meditating many things.

"It might be a way out of the difficulty. I'll see what Holbeach says to it," he decided.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLUFF HOUSE

THE Bluff House, as Virginia Holbeach's home was called, stood on the side of a hill, in a green bit of meadow around which the forest crowded. On one side its orchard adjoined the last fields of the settlement, but above it on the slope of "the mountain" and across the road toward the bay, stretched the thick woods that Mr. Holbeach owned and had beautified by clearing away the dead wood and choking underbrush that hindered the full development of the nobler sylvan growth. The house was on the usual model of the better sort of French-Canadian farmhouse, a model not unlike that of a Swiss châlet. There was the same overhanging roof, the broad veranda, and outside stairs.

The lower story of the house was of rough gray stone, the upper of wood painted yellow, and with the bright red roof it formed a cheerful bit of color against the somber evergreens. On this perfect May morning the breath of the balsam firs was strong in the air, lending a languorous softness to the crisp chill, a message from the outer sea. There was glad young life in everything, in the scent of growing grass and fresh damp earth, in the aromatic twang that came from the waxy brown buds of the tall, old cotton poplar near the steps.

Virginia stood at the open French window of the breakfast-room and sniffed in these various messages of

spring as might a young pointer. She looked like a cardinal-bird in her red golfing jersey and short serge skirt, and Miss Creighton, a dark, wistful-eyed, ugly little woman, sitting at the writing-table before a litter of open letters, watched her with a vicarious enjoyment of her bright young vitality. Not that Miss Creighton did not enjoy life on her own account. Luckily for Virginia, who had been left so completely in her hands, she was not the old-fashioned type of self-suppressing woman, but, while giving the girl a kindly care, she had steadily and cheerfully pursued her own occupations thereby avoiding that limpet-like devotion against which, sooner or later, the younger generation instinctively rebels. Make a weak claim on youth for sympathy, you alienate it; show it that you are self-sufficing, that solitude has no fears for you, and it respects you.

Still, it might have been better for them both if Miss Creighton could have managed to show enough of the deep affection she felt for the girl she had cared for ever since she could walk, to give a more expansive touch to Virginia's character. As it was, a mutual reserve always spread between their peacefully friendly relations. A plain woman is nearly always a self-contained one, that is if she has any pride, and Virginia, having the reticence caused by a solitary childhood, the two, though occupying almost the mutual position of mother and daughter, were never fused into that closest intimacy of word and deed, which is not unusual in such relations.

Conscious of the gap, Miss Creighton shed many a secret tear over what she thought her own failure to win her charge's confidence, though in less morbid moments, her own good sense told her that, either from circumstance or type, Virginia was one of those single-natured, late-developed girls who need the touch of their first

passion to stir them into expansiveness. Meantime, their relations were of the pleasantest, neither making too great demands upon the other, each going her own way, yet content in their companionship.

When a child, Virginia had taken into her head an idea that Miss Creighton was her godmother, and at the Montreal convent school, which she attended for a few winters, had learnt from the French girls to call her "Marraine."

There was more than one point of her history where the girl's imagination had filled in a blank, Miss Creighton acquiescing. It was thus that she called her now from the doorway, in her clear young voice:

"Look, what a day of days it is, Marraine, and come down through the woods. I'm going to the landing to see if they've got the boat-house in order, and to give the dogs a run. Don't they know it too!"

Czar, the black-and-white setter, was sitting upright, slowly waving his bushy tail, his dark eyes fixed upon her with the patient intensity of the trained dog. At the head of the steps a wiry-haired fox-terrier was whimpering and making little tentative runs to attract her attention.

Had Virginia bethought herself that the boat-house landing at the foot of the bluff was a point of vantage commanding a view of the ferry and of a certain track by which any craft must come or go to a certain little pink cottage?

Miss Creighton looked from the tempting outdoor prospect down to the budget before her and shook her head.

"I can't come out yet awhile, dear child; I have my morning's work cut out. I must decide which of these chintzes will do for the drawing-room and which for the

spare room. My orders must go to-day, if we want to make ourselves smart for your father and his guest."

Virginia had stood poised for motion like the great Artemis of the Louvre, but at these words the energy passed from her figure and she turned to face her friend with an uneasy questioning in her eyes.

"My cousin, my father calls him. Did you ever hear of Giles Holbeach before, Marraine?"

For all the cheerful serenity of the glance that met Virginia's, it carried a curious suggestion of being on guard.

"If I have, I certainly don't remember it, but you know what a wretched memory mine is."

Miss Creighton's memory had long been a convenient fallacy of hers when Virginia took to questions, and perhaps the girl had detected her subterfuge, though her laugh was pleasant as she retorted:

"I know that you say it is, though you can repeat the name of every flower in the woods."

"That's my hobby, my dear, and hobbies are the irregular verbs of life, ungoverned of rules," Miss Creighton made unabashed answer. Then, reverting to practical matters: "But before you go, tell me if you finished your order for Madame St. Maudez and if you like the blue and white chintz for the drawing-room?"

"The order for my new finery is all ready on my table. As for the chintz, it's just as you like. I really don't care."

"But you must learn to care."

"Oh, on a dark winter day, I consider the drawing-room sofas the most important question in life, but this morning, with the sun shining, and the dogs dying to be off, and with your wise head to settle it——"

"You won't always have my wise head——"

"I shall as long as I can. By-bye! Come Beau—come Czar," and with a scampering of padded feet and a glad yap or two she and her followers were off.

Down the steep meadow path they went, across the road and into the dappled light and shade of the woods. Though the hardwood trees were still leafless, the maples already wore their red tassels, the aspens were starred with gray velvet buds, and the wild cherries showed tips of vivid green that turned to pale gold in the sunshine. The path wound through thickets of blueberry bushes, on which the red leaf buds glowed like tiny berries, and by great patches of soft green moss, intermingled with the rough, winter-battered mayflower leaves that failed to conceal the fragrant pink blossoms.

Virginia passed these latter by as intimate friends, too precious to gather, and followed the dogs out to the edge of the bluff where the trees clung, one or two slipping over the brink to join those that here and there scaled the sheer bank. Pausing a moment to glance over the wide expanse of the outer bay where the sea breeze was already ruffling the surface and bringing in a line of brown-sailed fishing-boats, Virginia turned to the rough stairs of unpainted wood leading down to the big boat-house, built just out of reach of the winter's great ice-cakes that would have crashed building and boats to atoms.

The dogs had rushed ahead in canine fashion and now from the beach below came an ecstatic baying in the setter's deeper note. At the sound, a responsive thrill came into Virginia's eyes and she quickened her steps. Yes, the men were at work, for the boat-house doors were open, and one or two of the light wooden craft called all along the Gulf coasts "Gaspé canoes" were laid out on the sand.

The light went out from the girl's face as she saw that the setter was fawning on a man who with his back turned was kneeling by one of the canoes, a big man in faded blue jersey and high boots, with a soft felt hat crushed back on his head. Never had she seen the lordly Czar condescend to such effusiveness with Mallock, the boatman, and yet no one save Mallock could be at work there, she assured herself. Her sandalled feet were on the soft sand and she was close beside him before the man, becoming aware of her presence, sprang up and turned, and she found herself looking into Jack LeRoy's deep blue eyes and weather-beaten face. That face was graver and thinner than she had seen it last, but the old slow smile transfigured it as she looked.

"Jack!" she said with outstretched hand.

"Virginia! I beg pardon—Miss Holbeach!" and the red deepened in his face.

Virginia, her hand in his grasp, stared, and then laughed out: "Miss Holbeach! Whatever is that for?" she demanded blithely.

"It seems queer, of course, but I've got to learn it sooner or later," he asserted.

"There is no need ever to learn bad habits. Look at Czar, *he* doesn't greet you with any unpleasant new tricks," and she put up her chin in a disapproving fashion.

"No, dogs are faithful creatures," he agreed, letting one hand fall to Czar's reach, who proceeded to lick it rapturously.

"And aren't friends faithful, too?" she demanded.

Jack looked hungrily into the face that had through so many weary days been the desire of his eyes, and answered humbly: "Some are, I've good reason to know."

The look, more than the words, checked Virginia's spirit of investigation, and set her seeking a change of subject:

"Whatever are you doing with our canoes? Have you taken to burglary?"

It was a crucial moment for Jack, but he faced it steadily.

"Last night, Mr. Dorval gave me the job of guardian on your father's pools, and I was havin' a look at the canoes to see what mending they needed. *Now,* perhaps, you see why I called you Miss Holbeach," he said almost sternly, as though challenging any display of sympathy.

Tears sprang suddenly to her eyes, and she flushed and paled. "No, I don't see anything except that you are unkind," she panted. "If that were going to make all the difference, you shouldn't have taken it."

His face waxed grimmer under her words. "All right, I'll go right off and give it up, if you mind," he said.

"And what will you do?" she asked like a curious child.

"I guess I'll try for a chance of getting the same work on the North Shore somewhere, wherever they'll take me."

"Oh, Jack, why should I mind?" she protested. Then with a pleading smile through her tears: "Here we are squabbling over nothing, when you are just back safe from all those hardships, and I haven't even told you how glad I am you're home again."

"Are you?" he asked simply.

"Of course I am. We were so proud of you when we saw in the paper what you had done. They said, but for you, hardly a man would ever have got out of the woods."

If her words were sweet to him, he gave no sign.

"There wasn't much to be proud of, I'm afraid. Even a dog will half kill himself to find his way home. And talking of dogs, I've got to thank you for taking such good care of Czar. He's in splendid condition." And he bent and smoothed down the creature's silky black-and-white coat.

"Oh, we've grown to be great chums, Czar and I. I shall miss him."

He looked up with a sudden idea. "Wouldn't you like to keep him?"

Virginia's smile told that she knew the value of the offer, but she shook her head. "He wouldn't stay with me for a day when you were about. But, tell me, are you really going up to the camp?"

"Yes, next week," he announced cheerfully. Save for her view of it, there was nothing but pleasure to him in the thought.

The under-current of tragedy seemed to have passed them by, and she made gleeful answer:

"What fun! Esther and I will come up and have a day's trout fishing just like in old times." Then, a fresh, glorious thought dawning in her eyes: "Oh, why not go somewhere to-day with the rods? It's early, and we have lots of time to pole up to the Dartmouth. Louis Perrin would let us fish in Mr. Lethbridge's water, wouldn't he?"

"For sure, but——" Jack hesitated. He longed as he had never longed for anything before, for this one uninterrupted day with her on the old familiar footing, but he felt that she was proposing it as any child might seek a bit of pleasure, and, conscience warning him on several points, he tried to resist.

"There's my work, you see. Those canoes must be got in hand pretty soon."

"They won't be wanted for three weeks," she said, as well up in her river dates as he.

"And if they haven't been in the water yet, any one of them would leak like a sieve," he urged.

"So it would, but my own canoe is well soaked, as you'll see if you look in there behind the door," she triumphed. Then as he still hesitated: "I thought you would want to come," she reproached him.

"You know I do," he said deeply.

"Well, then," she hurried on, "I'll run up to the house for some lunch and my big coat, and two rods——"

"You can't carry all that," he interrupted. "You'd better let me go."

"But you'd have to stay for ever so long talking to Miss Creighton, and that would make us so late. You can wait at the stile. I'll get the things that far," she insisted, and he acquiesced.

They had so often, boy and girl, ransacked the larder and taken to the woods, that to her the whole thing might have been merely the resumption of an enjoyable habit reluctantly laid aside. If to him it meant far more, he was careful to give no sign of it.

"Going to the Dartmouth with Jack LeRoy?" Miss Creighton said, as Virginia made an excited raid on the kitchen, where she was interviewing the cook. "My dear child, don't you think it's a little early for that kind of thing?"

If this question were double-edged, the girl only noticed the most evident side of it.

"Too early? Oh, no, there have been trout caught a week ago, and I'll take my great big blanket-coat with me in case it comes up cold."

Miss Creighton studied her face reflectively, and, seeming satisfied with what she saw, made no further protest.

CHAPTER VIII

A DAY'S FISHING

STANDING erect, lightly balanced in the canoe, his long pole in one hand, wind and sun on his bare head, with its thick crop of close-cut yellow hair, Jack LeRoy had, in spite of his faded jersey, the viking look that came to him from his Norman forefathers.

"Come," he said, holding out his hand to Virginia, who stood on the lowest step.

She needed no help to drop into a canoe light as a homing dove, but now her hand fluttered in his as she settled herself on the cushion opposite Czar, who had already taken his sedate place. It was hard on Jack that, poling in the stern, her back should be turned to him, but, when he had been so long starved for a sight of her, it still seemed almost joy enough to watch the curve of her cheek, the loose dark hair under her red cap, her one bare hand resting lightly on the canoe's rim.

They kept along close under the shadow of the Bluff over the clear brown flats, on past the big lumber mills, newly awakened to work, up toward the head of the Bay and the dark hills that embosom the winding Dartmouth. They did not talk much. He felt that any words would have stirred the spell of content which her mere presence wove around him, and she basked in the sense of his strength and skill watching over her, as she basked in the morning sunshine.

All her life she had had no one who belonged to her save only Miss Creighton, no one save Jack, who, even as a freckled, pugnacious small boy, had always been her humble slave and follower. Now she had him back, and she knew in the depths of her tenacious spirit that she did not mean to part with him in a hurry.

They had a good way to go before they had reached the head of the Bay, but Jack poled on steadily, even when he met the fierce river current. In a brown backwater formed by a great barrier of interwoven timber, dead gray roots of giant trees upstretched octopus-like, the forest gloom on either bank, the river murmur the only sound, they fished.

"Look at those dear, soft gray clouds! Everything is just right to-day!" Virginia said with a wise glance at the sky.

So right it was, that a string of speckled victims was ready for their dinner hour. There was no bare shingle on which to build a fire, the river was still too high for that, but Jack had spotted a flat rock on their way up, and to this they dropped down. They were both too well used to the law of these great lumber regions to dream of careless fires.

Jack felt that the hour of his full compensation had come when, the fish broiled, tea made in the blackened kettle that had seen so many feasts, sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs, spread out before them on tiny birch-bark platters, he could sit opposite Virginia and hear her talk.

"I must get my week up at the camp early this year. What a splendid time we'll have," she said in gleeful anticipation.

"I'll mostly be on duty, patrolling the river or else down at my hut, so I'll scarcely get more than a sight of you," Jack said rather dismally.

"Oh, of course, I'd ask father to let you take me in the canoe," she consoled him.

"No, please, you mustn't do that," he said.

"Why not?"

"Don't you see, I've got to do the work I've undertaken, just like any stranger would? I'd hate to have your father think I was trying to hang 'round and shirk things——"

Virginia saw his face set in the fashion it had taken years ago when she had cut a fish-hook out of his hand, and caught a pained echo in his voice. Determined to drive the shadow away, and hardly realizing its full somberness, she protested cheerfully:

"Don't be a goose, Jack. Father would never think such unpleasant things." Then, to effect a diversion: "Did I tell you about the new cousin who is coming?"

The diversion seemed effectual.

"A cousin of yours?" Jack demanded, pausing from his task of filling her cup from the kettle.

"Yes, though I never heard a word about him before. It sometimes seems queer, how little I know about my father or my own family, doesn't it? I suppose if my mother had lived it would have been different," she added wistfully.

"I dare say. Men don't mostly care much for talking about things past and gone," Jack answered in all good faith.

Like most of the younger generation around Lanse Louise, he looked on Mr. Holbeach as a respectable widower with large business interests, probably in fish or lumber, in England. The local idea of wealth was concentrated in fish or lumber. If the older ones, like Dorval and Mrs. Sabine, were in possession of different theories or facts they kept them to themselves for the sake

of the girl they had seen grow up among them. There is more kindness than we think for in the world.

But it was not her father that now occupied his thoughts.

"But this cousin, where does he hail from—England?" he demanded.

"If he sails with father he must."

"And what's he coming here for?"

"Goodness gracious, don't scowl so! How do I know? To catch salmon, I suppose, as everyone else does."

"A fat lot he'll catch when he's never set foot in the country before. He'll be much the same as those navy officers who came here in the *Bulldog*—do you remember?"

Yes, Virginia remembered that historic episode, though her short skirts and pigtail had prevented any personal interest in it. An instinct of fairness made her now protest:

"But, Jack, I think some Englishmen must know how to fish, for I've heard father talking about the Scotch rivers, and last year he went to Norway fishing with English people in a yacht. Perhaps this cousin Giles was with him then, and may know something about it. At any rate, I hope so."

In Virginia's eyes, a relation who could not catch a salmon would have been a personal disgrace.

"I dare say," Jack assented gloomily, as though the prospect were not altogether satisfactory. "It is easy enough for rich people to learn to do anything they choose, and I suppose he is rich?"

"I suppose so," she answered carelessly, never guessing the importance her companion's sore heart attached to the fact.

"I wonder if there's any chance of your father taking

you back with him in the fall," he went on, turning the knife in his wound.

"To England? Why on earth should he?" Virginia asked in astonishment.

A fine instinct seemed to warn Jack that he might be venturing on topics that would wound her, for he made somewhat lame answer:

"Well, it seems natural he must want to have you with him."

Virginia shook her head in philosophic conviction. "I don't think he ever wants me, especially. I always used to feel that I bored him."

But Jack could not take this view of it.

"That was when you were a youngster. Lots of men don't like children 'round, and you were a child two years ago, when he was last here. But now—when he sees you——" and he paused expressively.

If she understood his meaning, she ignored it, saying soberly:

"It will be much the same, I expect. We never did seem to have a great deal to say to each other, though he is always as kind as can be, and brings me all sorts of pretty presents. So if he ever speaks of taking me away from here I shall just tell him that I don't want to go," she ended with cheerful decision.

"I wonder how he came to leave you here," Jack speculated.

"Miss Creighton told me I was such a delicate child that the doctor said I needed an outdoor life in the most bracing air, and that this place just suited me. Fancy me delicate, when I never remember having an ache or a pain," she cried, springing lightly to her feet, her slim red form outlined against the forest background.

"What a clean sweep we've made of it!" she said, con-

templating the few remnants of their sylvan feast. "Confess that you haven't had such a jolly meal for ever so long."

Jack was leaning back on one elbow, his pipe in his hand, an utter content softening his face. "Not since the last time we were out together," he said reflectively.

"When was that?" she asked with a little startled movement of her head, as she looked down at him.

The blue eyes met hers with sudden fire. "The day we snow-shoed to St. Marjorique," he said.

With a quick flash of memory she saw it all. The sunlit forest space with the great drifts piled among the trees, the fire built on green wood, the broiling steak, the tin of cocoa, Czar lying as now, close beside his master. She recalled the shadow of coming separation that fell over them as they watched their last fire die down. It was then that she had given Jack the tobacco pouch worked in dyed moosehair by Christy Anne, the old chief's wife at the Indian reservation—worked with a fineness and an archaic art such as is rapidly becoming obsolete. That same pouch, dimmed from its first brightness, was now in Jack's hands.

"You have it still," she said with apparent irrelevancy.

His thoughts had followed hers, as those of time-tried comrades have a way of doing.

"Yes, it's been with me right through. Once, just once, I left it behind in camp. That night I went back for it. It was moonlight, but the men thought me a bit crazy," he said, turning the thing over on his broad palm and staring at it.

"I don't wonder. How could you? I could easily have given you another," she breathed softly.

Jack gave one of those short laughs that hide feeling.

"You wouldn't have found it so easy to get at me just

then. Besides, no other would have been the same, even if I'd felt sure that night of ever seeing you again. I knew my luck would be gone if I lost it, for luck is just pluck, and the loss of it would have taken my pluck."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't." Then, with a sudden change to briskness: "Come, don't be lazy. It will soon be the best fishing time, and we must take something home to Miss Creighton."

In the mellow afternoon light they dropped down stream, the swollen river taking all Jack's skill to pilot the canoe among the snags and rocks. But there were quiet pools where they loitered to fish in contented silence, and where Jack had leisure to watch her as she lightly swung her rod, perched on a steady log.

Wind and tide took them without much effort down the "Southeast," as the head of the Bay was called, and the sun was still shining, though the landing was gray under the shadow of the Bluff, when the canoe drew in to it. Virginia had stepped out and stood looking down at Jack, who was about to paddle across the Basin to his home. Czar was still sitting erect, watching her uneasily, but making no movement to follow her.

"Czar is going to stay with you," she said.

"Not if you want him. Go, Czar——" he said.

The dog whined and rose, still looking with pleading eyes at his master.

"Oh, no, indeed. I couldn't have him here if father brought any dogs, you know. I'll see him often with you."

"Will you?" he wondered, as he sat, paddle at rest, watching her climb the steps to the top of the Bluff.

"Many more days like this, and I'd make a fool of myself. Well, anyway, I've scored that much against Fate," and he turned the canoe's prow toward the other shore.

CHAPTER IX

OFF GASPÉ

ON a day in early June the steamship *Canada* was plowing her way up the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Very blue and smooth seemed those waters after the great gray-green rollers of the outer seas; very soft and balmy the air with its breath of aromatic forest scents and its languor of wood smoke after the deadly chill of fog off miles of icefields. For two days before passing the Straits the Captain's brow had been clouded and his hours of rest curtailed, days when a sailor stood perpetually swinging up the canvas bucket in which to dip the thermometer that could warn of unseen iceberg or floe.

Now these perils were past, and the *Canada* had made the first spring passage through the Straits of Belle Isle, strange misnomer for that desolate region. Anticosti had been left behind, a dim cloud to the north, and the ship was skirting close to the forest-clad headlands of Gaspé.

The shining decks were crowded with groups of passengers, prosperous Canadians returning from a few months abroad; young Englishmen, the latest of the spring exodus to the northwestern land of promise; English girls on their way to visit friends who had made a home in those far-off regions, or to bring happiness to some waiting settler's cabin. A little apart from the other groups, Marcus Holbeach lounged in his deck-chair, watching those headlands with the air of one greeting old

friends. All around, over the sparkling water, were dotted brown-sailed whalers or dories, their crews busy with cod lines.

"It's a pity we couldn't be dropped into that fishing-boat," he said, as they passed one near enough to see the great shining codfish hauled up on the line. "It would land us not more than a dozen miles from home."

"Home?" repeated in a perplexed voice the younger man who sat beside him.

In spite of the family resemblance of long, delicate-featured face and pale coloring, there was a deeper dissimilarity between the two men than their twenty years' difference in age accounted for.

Worn and impassive as it was, the older face yet retained hints of a youth that had dreamed dreams and seen visions, while the trimly self-satisfied countenance of the younger man merely revealed his knowledge of his own value as an exemplary and successful member of society.

Heir to his cousin's estate, with a good university career behind him, secretary to a rising politician, and author of several approved articles on a political crisis in a continental state, Giles Holbeach felt entitled to take himself seriously, and did so.

"Home?" he repeated, with bewildered thought of the green riverside meadows of the family place. "You don't call your fishing-camp home, do you?"

That same fishing-camp and this Canadian trip were a secret grievance to Giles, reft away from the joys of a London June, from the clubs, the House, the drawing-rooms where a young man with ambition can always be furthering his interests.

He had no choice, though, when invited with a novel impressiveness by the cousin on whom all his interests

depended. He had, too, a certain unsatisfied curiosity as to these lengthy Canadian trips of a man who otherwise shared the annual amusements of his class, notably those in which Lady Warrenden was concerned.

Perhaps Marcus Holbeach had divined his grievance as well as his curiosity, for he smiled with lazy cynicism as he answered:

"I'm not sure that my fishing-camp might not make a good enough home—but I have a better one over there behind that range of hills. Wait until you see the Bluff House—and its mistress," he added significantly.

Blue-green waves, dusky headlands, and tawny sails swam dizzily before Giles' eyes in his sickness of disappointment. For a moment he felt quite ill, as his mental vision pictured a black-haired half-breed woman, possibly married, with a brood of barefooted, sallow children as the end of all his air-castles.

He had looked with strong disapproval on his cousin's rôle of purveyor to Lady Warrenden's costly amusements, but what a far more serious matter was this! If Marcus had a lawful heir growing up here in the wilderness, he himself would never, in the days to come, reign as master at Holbeach Manor.

"Its mistress?" he could only repeat blankly. Marcus, who must have guessed his suspense, hastened to put him out of his misery.

"Yes, I had meant, when I asked you to come out with me, to tell you of my daughter, Virginia—but, somehow, I didn't. Now you will meet her in a few days."

The unusual name had been in use for successive generations in their family, and sounded ominously in Giles' ears. All the same, that word "daughter" had in it a possibility of salvation from complete disaster, and acted as a tonic to pull Giles' scattered ideas together.

Marcus had spoken of his daughter as mistress of his house, and so there could be no wife, and probably no brood of children. Even the existence of a daughter was misfortune enough in the chance of most of the disposable property going her way, but there was a wide gap between that and the ultimate catastrophe from which he could have no hopes of rallying.

Stripped of his heirship by a son of Marcus, he would feel as bare as a newly clipped poodle or a French goose with its feathers plucked for the market; in fact, he already experienced a preliminary chill as the sea wind touched the clammy sweat on his forehead. And so, do his best, he could not quite steady the quaver of suspense in his voice, as he put the crucial question:

"You have just the one daughter? No others? No *sons?*" That last dreadful word came at a run.

Marcus Holbeach had always been a merciful man toward the foibles and weaknesses of his fellow-men, so now he was careful to fix his eyes on a bobbing fishing-boat, as he answered in level tones:

"No. Only the one ewe lamb."

Giles could not but draw a deep breath of relief as his own private world fell back into focus again.

Under the influence of this relief, he managed to make his voice cordial enough for decency when he said:

"I shall look forward to the meeting with extreme interest."

"And curiosity, I suppose? Well, that is natural enough."

"She has never been in England?" Giles ventured, the vision of the barefooted French fishing-girl still lingering.

His cousin seemed to divine his thoughts.

"Never, since she was a year old, though she is nine-

teen now. But, mind you," he went on more emphatically, "she is the daughter of a lady, and has been brought up as such. Miss Creighton, who has superintended her education, is a gentlewoman by birth. When Virginia was fourteen they began to spend their winters in Montreal, where she attended a good school. For the last two winters they have traveled a bit—have been to California and the West Indies——" Giles mentally noted the care with which their journeys had been made in a different direction from Marcus' Egyptian and Riviera haunts. "It is nearly two years since I have seen her, and she seemed little more than a child then. She was never the precocious sort. Still, she has always been quick-witted and sweet-natured, and her training should fit her to take her place in the world."

With growing dismay, his listener read an unexpressed significance into these words.

Unless Marcus married and had a son, he was heir to the family estate, but there were also large properties in a prosperous Midland town which his cousin was free to leave as he chose, and the income from these made all the difference in the importance of the master of Holbeach Manor. Was it possible that Marcus was hinting that his chance of complete inheritance lay in a marriage with this girl of mysterious parentage?

Now Giles was not a man given to day-dreams, but there was one pleasing problem, apt to lull him over coffee and cigarette, or in wakeful night hours, and this question was the identity of the future Mrs. Giles Holbeach. There were days when he saw a vision of a dainty American bride, well-dowered and fashionable, perfect in Parisian attire, ready of tongue and of wits to help on his career. But at times this charmer would fade into the background, while her place was taken by an English

damsel, tall and fair-haired and statuesque, daughter of a great house, and cousin to half the peerage. She ought to be an honorable, better still if she were a Lady Mary or a Lady Alexandra.

It would be like losing a tooth to part with these rosy possibilities, save for fruition. During the ten years or so he had been about in society, Giles had seen more than one of his contemporaries made or marred by his marriage, and had laid the lesson to heart. With an inward sigh, he heard Marcus go on:

"Now that she is a woman, I blame myself for not having sooner formed more definite views as to her future. The poor child has few friends beyond one or two neighbors in the village where she has grown up. I asked you to come out because I want you to know her, so that were anything to happen to me you could befriend her."

This parental sentiment was a bewilderingly new side to his amiably cynical cousin, but Giles did his best to respond suitably.

"Of course, even without knowing her, I should be ready to do all I could for your daughter—though with you to care for her——" he hesitated over the difficulty of speaking to a man of the days when he should walk no more in the light of the sun.

"Yes, yes, I know. Thank you," Marcus said, anxious, as every Englishman is, to get away from the intimately personal side of a question.

It was possibly a relief to both men when, just as a somewhat awkward silence fell upon them, the Captain, an old acquaintance of Marcus', came along with an offer to show him certain charts.

The latter responded with alacrity, and as they went off to the chart-room, Giles settled down to consider the information he had acquired.

"A lady, the daughter of a lady," his cousin had called her. Giles was also too familiar with the family traditions not to know that the child of a low-born mother would never have been given the name borne by so many of his kinswomen. Could she be Lady Warrenden's daughter? No; considering the girl's age, that hardly seemed possible if certain tales of that lady's previous admirers were true. Well, he did not care who the girl's mother might have been so long as he had not to marry her and spend the rest of his days glossing over the awkward facts of her birth. Awkward facts have such a trick of resurrection, he reflected.

Yet, the more he pondered the subject the more he saw how desirable from Marcus' standpoint such a marriage would be. He could hardly introduce the girl into English society as his daughter, but as wife to his cousin and heir, she could take a daughter's place and eventually be mistress of her father's home.

After all, she would be to her father the most substantial reason against matrimony, the supreme peril to Giles' future, and as such was she not worth annexing?

Lady Warrenden's husband was a chronic invalid, conveniently spending his days between Davos and Madeira. Chronic invalids are not given to dying, but still this one might chance to do so, leaving his widow free to marry. Considering all this, the newly discovered daughter might prove a useful ally.

And Marcus Holbeach—the man who had brought himself to reveal the hidden side of his life, the tragic romance of his youth, to the cool scrutiny of a worldling—what was he feeling as, after escaping from the Captain's theories, he paced the deck with a cigar?

"Poor child! And I cannot do better for her than give her that fish-blooded creature for a husband. He was

quick enough to know what I meant. I could see him calculating her value as I talked. But, after all, he's respectable, and if he will graciously condescend to marry her and bring her to Holbeach I shall try to settle down in all the odor of county sanctity. If it were not for Violet——"

But this reflection was allowed to drift into vagueness, while he stared at the hills already taking on the deep purple of evening, the hills in a cleft of which lay Lanse Louise and all that it meant to him. A man of warm heart and quick intellect, his life would not have been the failure he acknowledged it, but for a lack of the more robust strain of moral courage, without which none may hope to win outward success or inward serenity.

He was sensible of that lack now in an unmistakable nervousness at the prospect of meeting his nineteen-year-old daughter. What if he were to read in her eyes a new consciousness and resentment of her position? As a graceful, docile child, well cared for by Miss Creighton, she had formed an attractive feature of his Canadian home, until, young as she was for her age, he had two years ago begun to feel the constraint of the budding womanhood. Last summer he had postponed the question by absence, but this year every sense of duty and manhood demanded that he should make some effort to insure her future.

That brief, tragic episode of his youth had become so dimmed by time that he did not often think of Virginia as the child of his first, ill-fated love.

She had been governess to his half-sisters, and the two had loved speedily and passionately. He was in the army then, and a sudden call to active service had taken him off to India at a day's notice.

He had been given no time to go home, even for a day,

and her pitiful appeal did not reach him in time, nor did her later letters. His step-mother acted the part of a relentless moral woman, the old part of the Pharisees. The girl had no home or family, and the first tidings Marcus received told of her being driven out friendless into the world. He was at the front in a border campaign; he had little money, and was all but helpless. But he did what he could, cabling his father, and sending long letters of frantic remorse and tenderness to the girl he had wronged. It was all useless. The next letters that reached the little force brought the news of her death, leaving a child behind her.

Perhaps it was lucky for him that the days that followed bore such a stress and strain of hardship and peril as to dull even his remorse.

Before the campaign was over and Marcus was free to go home, word had come of his father's sudden death and his own inheritance. When he reached England he refused to meet his father's widow. His first instinct was isolation, and he lost no time in leaving the service. With a trained nurse in charge of the child, he sailed for Canada. Here he sought solitude on a salmon river and, taking a fancy to Lanse Louise, he settled himself in the Bluff House, first with the nurse and child, and later with Miss Creighton, who had answered his advertisement in a Montreal paper.

Here he stayed for two years, but he was young, and inevitably the world reclaimed him. At first his visits to England were short, but they gradually included the whole winter, sometimes all the year save the two or three months of early summer.

The crust of time formed over the old wound, and his intimacy with Lady Warrenden drew him deeper into the social vortex.

Such was the warp and woof woven by the Fates into the texture of Marcus Holbeach's life.

He had little liking for his heir; perhaps it was hardly in human nature that he should have. All the same, he inwardly acknowledged with whimsical amusement that, from a worldly point of view, Giles was likely to make a more brilliant thing of life than he himself had done.

"At any rate, there's small chance of his letting it all go for a woman's sake," he said to himself. "If I can only make him see that it's well worth his while to take my poor little girl, he'll do it fast enough. And if she is the kind to meekly admire him, and think most of her trousseau and bridal honors, it's all right. But if she has the soul of a dewdrop in sunshine, like Amy——" for a moment his whole being was immersed in the past—"well then, I swear to God, she shall have the very best I can give her."

When next Marcus came across Giles, he found him imbibing wisdom from the lips of an Ontario senator.

In the seven days of the voyage he had already laid up copious notes on the defenses of Canada and her future relation toward the Empire, with view to a series of magazine articles which he foresaw would bring him much kudos. After a day in Quebec, his schemes swelled to two volumes, and with such important preoccupations, it was natural that he should defer any consideration of Virginia Holbeach and her claims until after his meeting with that damsel.

CHAPTER X

THE WENONAH

"PON my word, it's not at all unlike the Lake of Como. Those white cottages over there might very well, in this light, be marble villas. I had no idea you had anything of this kind out here," Giles Holbeach said, contemplating with patronizing approval the sunset glories of the Basin, the purple gloom of the Shigshook hills, the oily stillness of primrose-tinted water between the velvety brown shadows of the banks, the peaceful houses,

> "Sleeping safe in the bosom of the plain
> Cared for till cock-crow."

Out in midst of that primrose streak of water was silhouetted the graceful lines of a yacht, her riding-light already showing in the rigging.

This yacht, the *Wenonah,* a yearly visitant to these waters, had come in at sunset, and, to Virginia's eyes, added a new note of friendliness to the scene.

The Holbeach family party, joined by Dorval, had strolled down to the Bluff, and were sitting on the platform at the head of the steps leading down to the landing.

"What idea had you about it?" Virginia asked somewhat abruptly.

She was deadly tired of the amount of polite con-

versation with which her cousin had favored her during the last two days. It was conversation in which, untried as she was, she felt the effort of a man of the world talking down to an unformed school-girl, and Virginia was used to being treated as a sensible person by her surrounding world, such as the Sabine family and Mr. Dorval. There was the latter now, close at hand, talking to her father. More than once she had heard Jack LeRoy's name, and her desire to listen was keen, but no, she must go on talking about nothing at all in the fashion Giles seemed to consider necessary to salvation.

"What idea had you about it?" she had asked, and at the apparently simple question, Giles turned a scrutinizing glance on her.

How slim and young and guileless she looked, bareheaded in the evening light, in the white habitant flannel that was her usual spring dinner dress, for June evenings have their own chill on the Gulf shores, and she never stayed indoors when she could help it. The result of his inspection was satisfactory to himself. If needs must, here surely was malleable stuff, ready to his hand for the shaping of a suitable wife. For all her unformed girlishness, Giles was quick to recognize an impalpable but very real air of good breeding, an air that would later develop into a distinguished bearing, familiar to him in the women of his race. And so Giles responded cheerfully:

"Oh, well, that's rather hard to say. I suppose I expected something big and desolate, something more like Norway. This place has a cosy look, almost like an English village."

Virginia gazed over toward the dark hills, untrodden since the beginning of things, save by Indians, hunters, and lumbermen, and then out to where the light on Cap Rosier stabbed the blue distance.

"I think you will find space and solitude enough here," she said. "If you want to see desolation, wait until you get up into the burnt wood district on the way to the St. John. There's nothing but the gray ghosts of trees, either standing or fallen. They remind me of a dead world."

"Were they burnt on purpose?" Giles asked, with a vague idea of settlers clearing land. He felt the flicker of amusement in Virginia's eyes, though he could not guess its cause.

"Hardly, when the timber was worth a fortune. A few years ago there was a bad fire across the Basin on the hills; in the daylight you can see the gray patch. Some children picking berries lit it. Now there is a heavy fine on any one lighting a fire within a mile of a timber limit."

Giles stored away this fact with the others which were to go toward his future magazine articles on Canada, or perhaps, if he did not find himself capable, in the course of a month or two, of dealing with all Canada, though that was improbable, on the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

"I am so sorry," Virginia added politely, "that the river is too high for you to go up just yet."

"Are you anxious to get rid of us so soon?" he asked, with an amused smile.

A consciousness of guilt caused Virginia to color deeply, a fact which he took as a modest sign of her enjoyment of his society. He was beginning to think that the girl might make a pleasanter wife than some up-to-date, self-important young woman, whom it would not be so easy to impress with a due sense of his importance.

"Oh, no, but I know how anxious you must be for your first salmon."

Giles was not so sure about that.

"Yes, of course, but then I like to get a general idea of

the country, too. Now, that visit to the lumber-mill today was most interesting. I learnt a great many new facts."

"Was it?" Virginia said. She could not see why anyone should want to look at a lumber-mill when they might go fishing.

Their conversation was unmistakably languishing and perhaps both were relieved when Mr. Holbeach, knocking the ashes from his pipe, called to his daughter:

"Dorval and I are going out to the *Wenonah* to look up the Tathems. Do you want to come, too?"

"Oh, of course, father. Do you think Tom and his wife are there?" Virginia responded alertly, moving toward the two older men.

"The best way to find out is to go and see," her father answered, reaching out a gentle hand to take hers as she stood beside him. "Well, Dorval, how would you care to be forced into realizing your age by the sight of a great grown-up daughter like this?" he asked.

"There might be less pleasant ways of finding it out," Dorval answered with a kindly glance at Virginia. He was pleased to see that her father was satisfied with her, though it struck him that the girl was a bit stiff and unresponsive toward him.

As they went down to the landing, Holbeach explained to his guest that the Tathems were old friends, being a wealthy Montreal family, who year after year came down for the fishing. "Only their pools are on the York, and thereby they reap the benefit just now, for the York is an earlier river than the St. John."

"How is that?" Giles asked with his usual polite thirst for information, and thereon ensued a fisherman's dissertation on times and seasons.

Giles was a bit surprised when the thin, sallow, middle-

aged man who seemed on such strangely intimate terms with his host and his daughter, unfastened the boat and took the oars in a matter-of-course way that told of having done it often before.

He had always thought Marcus Holbeach a reserved, stand-offish man and here he seemed to be the comrade or adviser of a whole village of various folk.

Virginia had taken the rudder lines in the same unquestioning fashion, and the two men sat one on each side of her in the stern.

Out over the oily calm water they went, now and then disturbing a cormorant that flapped away croaking.

They had reached the wider curve of the Basin where the yacht lay secure under shelter of the hills, and those on deck were watching them from the rails.

"One, two—I see two women," Virginia announced as though womenfolk were the most delightful novelty. "And—Oh, yes, I'm sure the tall one is Mrs. Tom."

Just then came a hail in a woman's clear voice:

"Is that you, Virginia, and is that your father? How sweet in you to come out. Hurry up on board."

A red-haired young fellow of twenty-three or four, bubbling over with mirthful welcome, met them at the foot of the gangway.

"Don't you know me, Virginia?" he asked audaciously. "Why, I declare, none of you do, not even Mr. Dorval."

"Don't be too sure of that, Master Hugh," was the latter's retort, and Virginia joined in gleefully:

"I knew you, too, after the first minute."

Giles was highly delighted to find himself on the deck of a yacht that might fairly recall the glories of Cannes or Cowes. The women, too, bore the mark of fashion even on their plain yachting clothes.

There was Mrs. Tom Tathem, big and fair and out-

doorsy as any upper-class Englishwoman, who was hugging Virginia and welcoming her father in a warm-hearted way. There was her sister-in-law, Cecily Tathem, a much more magnificent and less spontaneous person, bearing the stamp of heiress from the height of her elaborately dressed hair down to the tip of her silver-buckled shoe. The brothers, Tom and Hugh Tathem, were both big and fair and good-looking like their sister—indeed, like Mrs. Tom, who seemed to have been chosen because of her similarity to the family type.

Besides these, there was a young man of about thirty, tall and cadaverous, with a somewhat absent and dreamy cast of countenance. Him Giles heard them calling Noel, but whether it were Christian or surname, he was not sure.

There was a great flutter of talk in which it was explained that Tom and his wife had only a few weeks to give to Lanse Louise this year, and that then they must take the yacht back, as they were shortly to sail for England, Tom having to go over on a Privy Council appeal case.

"Hugh and Mr. Noel are to be our Jonahs, cast overboard into the maw of the first big salmon that fancies them—though fossils, not salmon, are the beloved of Mr. Noel's heart. When he and Tom were at Harvard together he used to fill the easy-chairs in their sitting-room with rocks and stones. Did you ever see a geologist before, Virginia?"

"Yes, that is, if a geologist is a man who collects fossils," was her unexpected answer.

There was a general laugh, but Noel looked at her as though just realizing her identity.

"Of course he is, and glad to get them. You don't happen to know anyone about here who hunts fossils,

do you? I want badly to see what I have a chance of finding," he said eagerly.

"Mr. Sabine at the hotel has shelves full. He and his daughter were down at Grand Grêve last week and came back with a lot. They were arranging them yesterday," the girl responded promptly. She liked to tell these people from the outside world of her Lanse Louise friends.

"I wonder if I couldn't see them," Noel said.

"Of course you could. I always run in to see Mrs. Sabine when I come back here, and we'll go up there in the morning. They are quite unusual people to be found in a small country hotel," said Mrs. Tom, who with Mr. Holbeach and Dorval formed their group, while the others talked apart.

"And so your friend Esther goes in for fossils, does she, Virginia?" she added.

"Yes, she has been to Percé once or twice with her father and knows all the best places to hunt in," said Virginia, and Mrs. Tom looked at Noel and said laughingly:

"The hand of Fate."

And then it came out that the Tathems, being equally delayed by high water on their river, were planning to take the yacht round to Percé for a day or two if the fickle Gulf winds kept as serene as at present. These plans included a carrying off of the Holbeach party, "and you, too, Mr. Dorval," said Mrs. Tom.

Virginia looked at her father with pleading eyes. She had marked Giles comfortably settled down to entertain Cecily Tathem, and felt sure that that young lady would take him off her hands for those few days. Mr. Holbeach politely pleaded their number, but was assured by Mrs. Tom that there was room for all.

"And it will be unexpected fun showing the sights to an Englishman, won't it, Cecily?" she called across the deck, and thus the others were drawn in and Giles was given a sketch of what he was to see.

And so the trip was arranged. Mr. Dorval standing out against going with them, and only promising that if the wind were fair he would sail over in his own boat to join them on the Saturday afternoon that left him free from business.

Giles and Virginia were both in visibly higher spirits as they rowed back.

About the Tathems and their yacht was an atmosphere of fashionable prosperity in which his Tomlinsonian soul expanded. A yacht seemed a welcome reprieve from that unfamiliar and uncomfortable camp in the wilderness with its horrors of mosquitoes and guides who would expect him to know all about his present bugbear, salmon.

As for Virginia, she was in that state of mind when a crowd is a welcome refuge. It was not so long ago that her father's arrival had been the ecstatic landmark of her year. Now there was a difference, a difference which, though impalpable, was strong enough to pain a heart essentially loyal. Was it that this year she felt her father was mutely demanding more from her, demanding what, by for so long shutting her out from his own life, he had put it beyond her power to give? Or was it perhaps the consciousness of a stronger influence, drawing her away to the working out of her own destiny?

All this, though vague, was real as the gliding sea-mist that has power to veil the brightest sunshine. Amidst it, Giles' unfamiliar, incongruous presence was merely worrying, like a bumble-bee against the window panes of a darkened room where one is trying to shut out thought.

CHAPTER XI

FOSSILS

ESTHER SABINE'S was a keen, vivid nature, intent on tasting life's experiences, its pleasures and penalties to the full. She could bear anything better than monotony, and of that she had already her full portion.

All winter she and Virginia had shared the same amusements, though necessarily even then, hers was the more arduous life of the two. Now her winter leisure was over, her summer routine of helping to run the full hotel was just beginning, while her friend was wrapped away from her by new companionship. Virginia would go sailing about the Bay, would be up on the river, here, there, and everywhere, while she spent the benign days doing accounts, giving out stores, making herself pleasant to boarders.

Last night she had sat on the veranda alone and watched the *Wenonah's* lights with a queer little feeling of being left out.

She had known the Tathems from childhood, for their father, being head of the great York Lumber Company that every winter sent its camps of men into the Gaspé forests, the family had spent most of their summers in a cottage at Lanse Louise and Mrs. Tom, who was their orphan cousin, then Maud Danby, had always come with them. She being, even at the age of fifteen, of a motherly nature, delighted to have the two children, Esther

and Virginia, dangling at her heels. Cecily, a year or two younger, had seldom taken much notice of them and kept them at a distance, but Maud rowed and bathed and gathered flowers and berries with them after she was grown up.

It was a gloriously still morning before the coming of the sea wind, and Mr. Sabine sat in the sunshine on the veranda, busily engaged, as the purposeless folk of life invariably are with futile tasks, in making labels to attach to some of his beloved experimental plants. There was a fragile elasticity about the man which had survived a stern transplanting. If Mrs. Sabine were at home, he would have been in the office apparently intent on the books, but she had taken the buckboard and driven off on a search for a setting hen, and over the premises reigned that peace which the absence of a strenuous mistress invariably brings.

Within sight, at the side of the house, Esther had been busy setting out some plants from the hot-bed which her father made and tended every year. Hers was not the brooding, personal love which middle-aged, contemplative women give to flowers. She merely worked at them to please her father, and from a craving to have her surroundings as trim and bright as might be.

Pleasantly tired, she had fetched herself a cup of milk from the dairy, and sat down on the veranda steps near her father.

The hotel stood close to the road on the outer edges of which ran the plank side-walk. Along road and side-walk came occasional passers-by who each and all had a greeting for the Sabines.

There was the French washerwoman's black-haired daughter, with all the swing and trim briskness of her kind in Paris streets. There was the doctor in a buck-

board, well coated with mud; there were trim man-of-war sailors from a Canadian cruiser now in port, and brown children from the half-breed settlement up the road, with baskets of dandelions for sale. Esther had a friendly greeting for all these atoms that made the world around her, but a new animation lighted her face as she saw a tall figure in smart white duck dress coming up the road. Beside her walked a man taller still, "a living skeleton," Esther thought as she ran down the steps and out into the road to meet Mrs. Tathem.

"Mrs. Tom!" she beamed. "I thought if I kept a sharp lookout I should spy you somewhere about to-day."

"You couldn't help it when I was on my way up to see you. This is Mr. Noel who is with us on board, and who came to keep me company while Tom and Hugh are ransacking the country for canoes and all sorts of things."

"What a dull-looking man for the Tathems to like," Esther reflected as she said:

"Mother will be so sorry to miss you. She's gone on a search after a setting hen. Here's father."

Mr. Sabine had risen, the nervous flush on his face that the least excitement brought there, but his pleasure at sight of Mrs. Tom was evident.

"Three years," she said, "since we've been near Lanse Louise. You must have thought matrimony had changed us for the worse. But, really, what with the babies and what with a summer abroad, I thought we were never going to get back here again. Tom and I vowed that if it were only for a week, we shouldn't miss the river this year, so here we are, and really Virginia Holbeach is the only person who is a bit changed. Everyone else looks as young as ever. Lanse Louise must have the secret of perpetual youth, Mr. Sabine."

In face of the latter's fragility, the careless words sounded almost cruel. Mr. Sabine shook his head silently, and with a fierce ache at her heart, Esther said to herself: "Doesn't she see? Doesn't she see?"

Mrs. Tom went on to introduce Mr. Noel in a vague fashion of her own that slurred over his name, and to explain that he had heard of Mr. Sabine's collection of fossils and would like to see them. The poor man's eager joy at prospect of a sympathetic audience was pathetic. Pathetic, too, were those rough shelves in a dark passage leading to an added wing, where his treasures reposed.

"Oh, if he is sniffy about them, how I shall hate him!" Esther said to herself in the midst of Mrs. Tom's chatter. But she was soon set at ease. There was nothing save a deferential interest in the fashion in which the stranger listened to the tale of how this or that was secured.

"My daughter was with me," or, "Esther, did we find that at Percé?" Mr. Sabine said more than once, and presently Noel commented with a smile: "I see you are lucky in your assistant."

Mr. Sabine put his hand through his daughter's arm with a dependent gesture.

"Ah, yes, Esther and I have had some pleasant rambles together, though now I find they somewhat tax my strength. We had planned to get to Percé once more this spring, but I fear we sha'n't manage it."

Mrs. Tom was the soul of kindness, and not pausing to consider if Mr. Sabine would make a congenial element in her party, she said impulsively:

"Well, here is your chance now. We're starting tomorrow for a few days at Percé to show our friend here the promised land. Tom, too, thinks he may get some

fresh specimens of sea-fowl, and I'm keen to photograph the rock and the pilgrimage mountain. So you and Esther pack your bags and come on board to-morrow morning. Tom vows he won't wait for any one after ten o'clock."

Did she really mean it? Esther wondered, flushing with joy at such a marvelous prospect. Two or three days away from Lanse Louise, that had so long shut her in between the hills and the sea, days in the society of cheery people who talked and laughed in unrestrained equality, seemed the rosiest prospect to her. But her father shook his head gently.

"It is like your kindness to wish to burden yourself with an infirm old man," he said, with a touch of courtliness new to Esther; "but my day for young folks' jaunts is over. If you will take Esther, though, it will give us equal enjoyment—me to hear of, and her to experience, some little adventures."

Esther listened, marveling. It was her father thus settling matters, he whom she had never heard give an order without first nervously referring it to Mrs. Sabine.

"That's a bargain, then. Esther will join the scientific branch of our expedition under our distinguished friend," with a wave of her hand toward Noel.

It seemed terrible to cast any doubt on such a dazzling reality, but Esther felt bound to put in a caution.

"Do you think mother can spare me, father?" she asked gently.

The new light and purpose faded from Mr. Sabine's face, and the old nervously furtive look reappeared as he glanced back along the passage almost as though expecting his wife to appear.

"Of course, we must see what she says to it before

we decide. I trust you will not think us ungrateful for hesitating—" with an appealing glance at Mrs. Tathem.

"Oh, Mrs. Sabine won't object. Why should she? The summer rush hasn't really begun yet," she said with her usual optimism.

Presently the two visitors went their way, leaving father and daughter looking at each other with the guilty air of conspirators. As Mrs. Tom and her guest strolled down the plank walk under the row of tall fir trees, she sniffed the balsamed air appreciatively.

"Isn't it a dear place," she said; "a regular haven of rest from the world."

"Exactly so," he agreed, his thoughts still on one of Mr. Sabine's specimens that he would dearly like to own.

"And yet," she went on, half thinking aloud, "it sometimes seems as though the queer stories, the untold tragedies of life flourish most in such nooks and corners."

Noel came to the surface from his meditations with unusual promptness for him. As a rule, human beings seemed to occupy an unfocused background in his mental vision.

"You're thinking of the two we've just left?" he asked.

"Yes. I don't really know anything more of them than what we see, but it's easy to guess that it took some tragic mystery to transform such people into village innkeepers. And if you could see Mrs. Sabine—" she paused expressively, then added: "Whatever mystery there is, I think Mr. Dorval knows. He's been an intimate friend of theirs ever since they came, though I believe he only met them on the boat coming down. Dear me," she went on, embarked on her recollections, "it makes me feel awfully old to think I remember the day they landed. I was about twelve then, and it must be—let me see—seventeen years ago. It was a cold, rainy

June morning, but my uncle took me down to the wharf because the captain was bringing me my first trout rod.

"Mr. Dorval was on board and everyone was laughing and telling the news, when I caught sight of such a forlorn group. Mrs. Sabine was standing quite still with a child about a year old in her arms and Esther huddled up against her, a solemn, frightened-looking mite in the daintiest of clothes.

"I've sometimes thought that neither she nor her mother have ever had such clothes since, as they wore then. Child as I was, something in Mrs. Sabine's face made me think of all my saddest story-books, and I wondered if she were some queen hiding from cruel enemies."

"Queens weren't bothered by extradition laws," Noel said significantly, but she let the hint pass, and went on:

"Mr. Sabine was fussing about in a helpless way, followed closely by a nice-looking little boy of six or seven. Uncle was just going ashore when Mr. Dorval said: 'I think I'll wait and give a helping hand to those people who seem a bit astray.' Presently, we saw him driving them all up to the hotel—an awfully dirty hole it was then, kept by a French woman—and there they've stayed ever since."

Noel seemed interested in this retrospective stream.

"And when did their reign begin?" he asked.

"Not for two years, and they must have been two years of dire poverty for them. That first summer Tom was working for his McGill entrance exam and was awfully disgusted when Mr. Dorval suggested Mr. Sabine as tutor for him and another boy, but when they found what a good German scholar he was, they got up a class among all the young folks here. I think, too, I heard that Mr. Dorval used to read with him in the winter, but, of course, the second summer when we came back and

found the French woman had died and the Sabines were running the hotel, Mr. Sabine was too busy to teach any more, at any rate he didn't. I remember hearing Tom's father say he thought Mr. Dorval had advanced the money for them to buy it."

"And they made it a success?" Noel asked.

"Oh, yes. It's the best hotel, in a plain way, from here to Metis. It's always full in the summer and lots of sportsmen come in the autumn for the shooting."

"And the young lady?"

"She helps her mother, who is the mainspring of the thing. I don't fancy Mr. Sabine has ever done much save keep the books. She's a splendid girl, Esther."

"And she's here all winter?"

"I suppose so. At least, I never heard of her going away."

"It's a dull life for a girl."

"Yes. I was thinking to-day it might be a good thing if Mr. Dorval would marry her."

But Noel did not seem to agree with her.

"Surely a dry, middle-aged business man like that wouldn't be much improvement for her," the young man urged from his masculine standpoint.

"He's made lots of money, Tom says, besides a fortune his uncle left him lately, and he needn't stay on here unless he choose. In fact, they all wonder why he does. It would give her a chance of seeing the world, at any rate," Mrs. Tom persisted.

"A doubtful privilege," Noel objected obstinately.

It was not long before Mrs. Sabine drove home in her buckboard, her slim, gray-clad figure alertly erect, the hen with aspirations toward setting disposed in a basket under the seat. As she turned in to the stable, Mr. Sabine fidgetted off to the post-office, and Esther understood that

she was left to settle matters for herself. Her heart beat a little faster as Mrs. Sabine sat down wearily in a big rocking-chair. She was a slightly built woman, though with a suggestion of tempered steel in her delicate make. There had always been curiously little of the feminine intimacy of mother and daughter between the two, though they worked together without the jars which sometimes accompany household intimacy.

"You look tired. Shall I get you a glass of milk?" Esther asked, with a glance at the dark head resting against the red cushion.

"No, thanks. Mrs. Dane insisted on making tea for me. A wearisomely talkative woman. I had to listen to the whole story of the death of her sister's two children at Easter."

Esther understood the tired droop now. She remembered clearly, although it was never spoken of, the time that her mother had lost two children by diphtheria shortly after they had come to live in Lanse Louise seventeen years ago.

"We had visitors, too," she said hastily, to divert the other's thoughts. "Mrs. Tathem and a man who is with them were here. She was sorry not to see you. Only think—" her voice trembled before she took the plunge—"She asked me to go 'round in the *Wenonah* with them to Percé to-morrow for a day or two."

"I suppose you said it was impossible," Mrs. Sabine responded without troubling to turn her head toward her daughter.

Esther gulped down her first taste of disappointment and stuck to her point with a new courage.

"Father seemed to think I might go. Only he said that I had better wait and ask you."

"Your father would always—" Mrs. Sabine flashed out,

and then checked herself, looking dispassionately at Esther.

"Why should you want to be with people whose lives are so different from yours, when all you see and do with them must only make it harder for you afterwards?"

Esther had always accepted the limitations of her lot with cheerful philosophy, but now she let the intense, the almost instinctive craving for pleasure have its way.

"But I *do* want to," she broke out. "I don't care how hard it is afterwards, I can't bear to lose that one little bit of enjoyment. Mother when you were young you must have had more—"

She stopped, checked by the force of her own appeal. Her mother's usually colorless face had taken on a gray shade, and she raised a hand as though to thrust away that invoked past.

"Yes, I had more. It's true what you say. It's your own life and you have a right to take the risks. I did not know you cared so much."

Esther's eagerness was turned to compunction in attainment, as is the way with generous natures.

"I won't go if you mind it," she said drearily.

Mrs. Sabine answered in her usual voice, quiet almost to indifference:

"Why should I mind? After all, it's only a day or so's trip. Is Virginia Holbeach going?" and the commonplace resumed its reign.

CHAPTER XII

OFF PERCÉ

THE Angelus had not yet sounded from the spire of the French Church on the bluff, when the *Wenonah* sped past, her party augmented by four.

"We'll be packed like herrings in a barrel," grumbled Cecily Tathem, who liked to have plenty of room for her clothes.

"Oh, what does it matter for a day or two! What does anything matter so long as we're not sea-sick?" responded Mrs. Tom, cowed by her great enemy.

The points enclosing the Basin were left behind and the yacht followed the long curve of the channel that would take her round the lighthouse on the end of the bar, and on, fifteen miles, to the open Gulf.

The hills were of an incomparable blue, blurred with purplish horizontal streaks, shadows of drifting wood smoke from the big lumber mills. The water rippled under a sea breeze that brought in one or two brown-sailed fishing-boats before it. It was an ideal time for setting forth on a holiday.

The group on the deck was already pairing off in the form it was likely to retain. Cecily's discontent had soon faded at sight of Giles Holbeach's correct yachting garb and air of mild superiority. She was not long in finding that he was intimate with some dear friends in Cannes villas, and, with deck-chairs bestowed in a sheltered

corner, they discoursed on the lost joys of that charmed orbit, Giles even forgetting his note-book, and the names of headlands and mountains to be accumulated therein.

Esther and Virginia were camped on a rug near the rail, bareheaded to the sun and wind. To them Noel had brought a work on fossils to show Esther some of her treasures classified, while Hugh Tathem and Virginia had their heads close together over a fly-book.

Virginia's navy blue serge with its broad white sailor collar gave her the air of a fifteen-year-old school girl, and there was a blitheness in her voice that matched the youthfulness of her dress.

"The young folks have sorted themselves out quickly," Mrs. Tom said to Mr. Holbeach, with an encompassing benevolent glance. She liked to pose as though her four years of matronhood had been fourteen.

Mr. Holbeach's eyes followed hers, and their expression was enigmatic.

"Evidently," he agreed in non-committal fashion.

"Now, Nan, stick to your photographs and don't you be up to any of your match-making tricks," her husband adjured her the next time he caught her alone. "It struck me the fly-book business didn't exactly fit in to Holbeach's scheme of action. His polite smile had a chill on, when you called his attention to it."

"I never meant anything," the lady indignantly protested.

"I know you didn't, but then it isn't everyone knows what a delightfully irrevelant creature you are."

His hand on her shoulder turned the words into a caress.

"Don't call names, Tom. But you don't think he means that dried-up little prig for Virginia, do you?"

"Meaning cousin Giles? Well, yes, I think it looks like

it. Perhaps he wants her to have a right to the name, you know," he added in a lowered voice.

"Poor girl!"

Mrs. Tom was lying down in her cabin as a precautionary measure against the long swell with which the open Gulf received them, and her husband, never far from her side on a holiday, was lounging on the sofa.

"Tom!" came again. "Do you think Hugh and Cecily know?"

"About her? I'm pretty sure they don't. *I* never did, until that time I was in England after we were engaged, when, as you know, I met Holbeach in Piccadilly and he asked me down to his place for Whitsun. Lady Warrenden's full-blown splendor was a revelation to me, also her acknowledged intimacy with my host. The first night at dinner the lady next me spoke of him as an unmarried man, and I took the chance to ask casually if he were not a widower. She ridiculed the idea, so, of course, I kept my own counsel, but when I came home I questioned my father who said he had, from the first, taken the state of affairs for granted. I only told you because you seemed fond of the poor child——"

"So I am!"

"I know. Some day we may have a chance to help her. But I shouldn't think of telling Hugh or Cecily unless it were necessary."

"You mean if Hugh were to fall in love with Virginia?"

"He's in love with her now, but then he always is with someone or other. If it became serious, I should tell him, or if Cecily showed signs of considering Holbeach as possible prey."

"Good gracious, Tom! How can you suggest anything so dreadful! Cecily would never——"

"I expect she'd swallow more than that to be the mistress of a place like Holbeach Manor. And remember, he is an attractive man, barely fifty, if that."

"Yes, but think of Virginia's mother and Lady Warrenden," she protested.

"I don't mean I'd like it, but still, Holbeach is a good fellow. I doubt if anyone knows of half the people about here to whom he has secretly given a helping hand. So don't get on your moral high horse, please," he answered from his masculine standpoint.

"Of course, I won't. All the same, I almost wish we hadn't asked them to come."

"Nonsense! Don't you worry. Hugh and Cecily are quite able to look out for themselves. See, it's as smooth as a mill-pond now. We must be under Bonaventure Island. Come on deck and see what's going on."

Tom was right. Mal Baie was crossed, and the yacht had rounded in under the lee of a long green island, while right in front of them towered, sheer from the waves, a great detached square of rock, its base fretted into an arch framing the blue water beyond, its flat top crowned by a noisy mass of nesting sea-birds.

The smooth, richly tinted sides of the rock glowed a golden umber in the level sunshine. Beyond it lay the curve of shore with its anchored fishing-boats, its row of white houses and sheds, while above rose steep meadow slopes to meet the thickly wooded hills with fantastic outlines edging the sky. One detached hill, almost overhanging the shore settlement, was crowned with a great black cross and shrine, and to this a winding road marked by stations of the cross could be seen rising. Basking in the afternoon sunshine, sheltered in the cup of the hills, the little white houses faced the great solitude of the northern Gulf with an air of cheerful peace. Every-

one had forgotten his diversions in the interest of the scene, for those who knew the place best had not been there for a year or more, though only to Giles and Noel was it altogether new.

In answer to the former's queries, why Percé should have a shrine and Lanse Louise none, Mrs. Tom explained:

"I think in Canada we take our nationalities in streaks like bacon. This place and Mal Baie are French; round the corner there's Douglastown, a Scotch settlement, while Lanse Louise, in spite of its name, is Protestant Jersey. I daresay it's perplexing to a stranger."

"Very," Giles agreed, with a disapproving air.

How was any one to write a book about a country stretching over a continent, and with characteristics changing every twenty miles?

But Tom was pointing to a streak of golden sand under the arch, and along the sheer base of the rock.

The tide was out and now was the time for those who wanted to land there. A boat was lowered, and Mrs. Tom and the girls were helped down.

"I'm going to prowl about in the dinghy with a gun, on the chance of getting a rare bird," Tom announced. "Want to row me, Hugh?"

No, Hugh explained with cheerful assurance, he thought he'd land and help Noel grub 'round.

Mr. Holbeach volunteered for his host's society and the others were pulled to the rock.

At their approach the clamor above redoubled and clouds of birds hovered overhead as though defending their fortress from the intruders.

"I should have thought the easiest way to get specimens would be to climb the rock," said Giles conversationally.

"You'd most likely be a specimen yourself before you got far, and if you survived the process, you'd be arrested. No one has ever got up there, and after some lives were lost, the attempt was forbidden. So you see, the birds can afford to cheek us," explained Hugh, who had already taken a contemptuous dislike to the Englishman. His fellow-countrymen who loved this land of big salmon rivers and game-haunted forests were of a very different type from this trim townsman.

The boat touched the shore and the little party scattered along the amber strip left bare by the tide. Giles and Cecily sought out the dryest and cleanest rock available and settled themselves there while the lady proceeded to give her squire a sketch of official society in Ottawa. Her father being a senator, she basked in the rays of vice-royalty for three or four months every year.

Esther, with the simple directness which was her characteristic, piloted Mr. Noel through the arch to the other side of the rock, where she and her father had been lucky in their search for fossils.

Hugh Tathem, boldly ignoring his announced intention of helping them, stuck to Mrs. Tom and Virginia.

The latter was in a mood of childlike glee. Her father's and Giles' arrival had been more of a nervous strain than she had guessed at the time. Now, freed from that responsibility in the kindly society of those she had known from childhood, she expanded like a flower in sunshine.

Roaming around, they explored the rocky ledges, finding queer seaweeds and egg shells fallen from the crags above. There were entrancing little pools among the rocks, and Virginia, yielding to the old childish temptation, soon had shoes and stockings off, venturing slim, white feet into the crisp wavelets.

"Come on, Mrs. Tom! Do try it!" she urged. "It's icy cold and sends tingles all over you."

It is only for a few summer weeks that those Gulf waters are ever really warm, and those weeks were yet to come.

Hugh had rolled up his white trousers and was wading beside Virginia.

"Keep still a bit," Mrs. Tom ordered, "I want to get a companion picture to Cecily and her friend on their perch over there. I might label them 'Gentility' and 'Vagabondism.' I don't see why you need hold Virginia's hand, though, Hugh."

"She might slip on the seaweed and get soaked," was the unabashed answer. Hugh had, from the first, been scheming to get a photo of himself and Virginia together, a photo which he meant to steal from Mrs. Tom.

It was thus, standing hand in hand, bareheaded, with laughing faces, their feet in the water, that Holbeach saw them as the dinghy came round the rock, saw them with a sudden sense of helplessness in his attempt at arranging his daughter's future.

The thought of her as mistress of his English home, with a right to bear the family name, had been a wonderful salve to his conscience of late years.

The sight of Virginia after eighteen months or more, an eventful period at nineteen, had satisfied any doubts as to her being fit for the position he coveted for her. Fair of face, graceful, sweet-voiced, with a quick responsiveness of intellect—what could any man ask more in a well-dowered bride?

But what use was all this if Virginia did not fancy the good things he had chosen for her, if Giles would not take the trouble to attract her with them? A chill sense of failure depressed him for a moment, then, with a

determination of optimism he scanned Hugh's well-built form, his jolly, sturdy face, with its lower jaw bespeaking determination, the face above which the closely cropped, thick red hair rose like a halo. He knew of the Tathems' wealth and standing in Montreal, had known and liked the boy for years. Surely he would have nothing to complain of, if his daughter chose Hugh Tathem for a mate. Ah, but where did he himself come in in such a case? Where was the home he had dreamed of for his old age, Holbeach Manor, with Virginia for its mistress?

There was a new influence at work in his mind, making him shrink from loneliness.

"It looks as though Fate were lending Violet a helping hand," he said to himself with a touch of impersonal amusement.

He had glanced toward Cecily and Giles with a strong distaste. Make the best of him as he might, Giles was but a poor thing to represent family ties.

Was it too late now in these latter days to think of wife and home? Yes. The few grave words and the still more significant silence of the Harley Street specialist whom he had consulted this spring, both saying "set thine house in order," came back to him, and he sighed for the many good days past, for the few poor ones remaining.

Then he took a sudden resolution. He would not be so easily beaten. He must lose no more time in speaking to Giles more frankly than he had done, and if that worthy did not care for the plan, he would have to say so openly, and some other would be found. He was yet far from realizing that, as the logical result of his own actions, he was perforce to be an onlooker instead of an actor in the game of his only child's destiny.

CHAPTER XIII

ST. ANNE'S SHRINE

TO Mrs. Tom's infinite relief, the next morning brought serene seas and skies. Fishing-boats dipped softly on the blue plain and wavelets rippled at the base of the rock and on the shelving cobble beach beyond. The only unrest in the surrounding blue spaces was in the clamoring, hovering hordes of sea-fowl.

Nature's benign aspect so cheered the lady of the yacht that she made haste to organize a party to climb to St. Anne's pilgrimage shrine on its hill-top.

Neither Esther nor Virginia had ever been so far, and were eager to go, but Cecily Tathem announced her preference for a quiet morning on board. If she had thought that Giles might keep her company, she was disappointed, for, Mr. Holbeach volunteering to show him the village sights, he had no choice but to acquiesce.

The two men stood near the landing, watching the last of the gay little party as they followed the steep upward path.

"It's good to be young," Holbeach said with an unwonted echo of regret in his voice.

"For a man, I think the thirties are better than the twenties. One has learned to appreciate the savor of life by then," returned the man who had never known the dreams or rash impulses that are the better part of youth.

The elder man made no effort at discussing the question. "Well, let's go and look up some of my old friends," he said, and forthwith came a revelation to Giles of a new side of his cousin's character.

There was a group of bronzed, weather-beaten men lounging at the door of the big Dorval store, where yellow oilskins dangled in rows like the ghosts of drowned fishermen, and at their approach these loungers brightened into volubility.

Giles could not quite follow their French, the French of pre-Revolution Normandy, but he could not fail to understand the heartiness of their greeting.

"*Tiens,* and to think we never guessed that the Monsieur de Lanse Louise should be on board the yacht of the little Tom," said one.

"The little Tom is more the Monsieur de Lanse Louise than I am, my good Labelle. His father owns the mills and the forests, while I am but a stranger from overseas," Holbeach made genial answer in his polished Parisian speech.

"But no, never a stranger on these shores! My grown boys were babies when you first came amongst us. My Louis was a proud *gamin* when you took him in the crew of your *Phantome,* Monsieur," said the old man with real feeling.

"Ah, and what do you hear from Louis now?"

"Fine news, fine. He is mate on the steamer that goes from Quebec along the North Shore, all the way to Labrador, thanks to you, Monsieur, and the examination you helped him to pass."

"Thanks to his smart wits," Holbeach interrupted. And then it went on, the same thing with one after the other. Each one seemed to have some friendly act to recall, some link of benefits received. Was the selfish,

listless man of the world playing a part, Giles wondered, with the instinctive doubt of his mind, or could this be, by chance, his real nature revealed?

Along the street came a burly, swarthy priest in weather-beaten cassock, and like a great bull he charged down on them with benevolent thunder of voice, and with a hand-grasp that numbed Giles' arm.

"The good comer of the springtime," was his greeting. "Father LeMoyne shall pay me a pound of the best snuff for this. Last year when we failed to see you, he swore you would come no more, that in the great, rich world, *là bas,* you had tired of your poor friends, hidden here between the Gulf and the hills! But we knew better than that, eh, my sons?"

An obedient chorus answered him, for the big priest was dispenser of the affairs of two worlds to the fisher-folk. Nothing would content this worthy ruler of his flock but that they must go with him to the Presbytère and have a glass of Chartrêuse.

"Or Benedictine, or anisette, those I can still offer you," he said, with a wave of his hand toward an old-fashioned glass cupboard that filled one corner of his bare, clean parlor.

"Then you still have a friend or two in St. Pierre?" Holbeach asked with a significance lost on Giles.

"Ah, but, my friend, you know too much. You must not shock this gentleman, your nephew, with tales of our poor little doings. These new cruisers the government at Ottawa have sent out hardly leave a poor fisherman a chance to get in a few bottles of liqueur now-a-days for those who love the drinks of old France. As for those poor folk of the French islands, they are in misery, true misery——"

"Let them give up smuggling and make an honest

living then," said Holbeach decidedly, and Giles began to understand what it was all about.

He sipped his Chartrêuse with added zest, enjoying the novelty of smuggled goods, and making a mental note of it for his book.

The Angelus sounded from the shining tin spire on the hill before they tore themselves away from Holbeach's various admirers, and strolled up a rough road with red clay banks that reminded Giles of Devonshire.

The sun was hot on this June noontide, and they were glad to rest on some rocks under a clump of tall fir trees, to smoke and stare down at the curve of the bay, shut in by Bonaventure Island, at the great rock with its noisy birds, and at the *Wenonah* lying at anchor hard by.

"I suppose the place seems to you a very Ultima Thule, and yet to me it is always homelike," Holbeach said presently in reflective fashion.

"I can see that," said Giles; "I had no idea that you——"

"Could make myself so agreeable?" the other put in as he hesitated. "Well, you see these men are old friends to me. When I was young I lived at Lanse Louise for two years, summer and winter. My only change was a summer cruise in the Gulf, or a winter's shooting trip in the interior."

"Heavens!" Giles ejaculated, deciding mentally that these regions had been the scene of an irregular and protracted honeymoon. He was utterly incapable of guessing at or comprehending that two years' vigil of remorseful grief.

Holbeach took no notice of his surprise, but went on dreamily, as one paying small heed to his listener.

"Yes. Every time I come back, the Bluff House seems

more my real home. I believe I should rather look my last at the sky here than in England."

Any mention of the realities of life and death always made Giles uncomfortable. He felt such topics ill-bred.

"Don't speak of such things. I hope there is no need to think of that for years to come," he said uneasily.

He did not see the smile on Holbeach's face, the smile of one who could contradict if he would.

"No, there's no need to speak of it now," he quietly agreed, hearing all the time that inward voice saying: "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt surely die and not live."

They smoked in silence, the rhythmic rush of the swell on the cobble-stones, the tinkle of cattle bells from the hills, and the cries of sea-birds on the rock seeming to emphasize the stillness.

"I wonder if you've begun to understand the reason I brought you here?" was the question that came like a bombshell in the midst of Giles' peaceful meditations over a chapter in the work which was growing alarmingly in prospective bulk.

So he had been haled to this hillside for the open discussion that he had so long foreseen and dreaded.

"Here?" he stammered, looking vaguely round. "To see the place, I suppose." This supposition gave him a minute to arrange his thoughts.

"Here—to Canada, to Lanse Louise, to the Bluff House," the other quickly corrected.

Giles was ready now, and began with a modest air of conscious merit:

"Perhaps I could hardly help supposing, or rather surmising—though it seemed a presumptuous idea——"

"Never mind that," Holbeach interrupted. Giles had succeeded in making him take the initiative.

"You have seen my girl," he went on curtly; "do you think you would be willing to marry her, and make her the mistress of Holbeach Manor?"

There was no shirking this direct question. Giles had already decided that he had no choice but to agree with his cousin's plan—after all, it might have been worse.

So he answered with every appearance of ready good will:

"Certainly, there is no reason in my charming cousin that could make me unwilling. Of course, it would be most repugnant to me to force myself on her——"

"You may be sure that I should never dream of such a thing," was the emphatic response. "What I want to know is: are you ready to do your best to fulfill my wish? Remember, in that case, I should like you to make your headquarters at the Manor, which would be kept up in its old style, and I should use all my local influence to get you into Parliament."

This was comforting, for Giles had had horrid visions of being asked to spend the best of his life in Lanse Louise, as prince consort to the young queen. The sense of relief gave his answer a genuine ring of sincerity.

"You are, as always, kindness itself to me; but, believe me, there is no need to offer any further inducement. I shall feel myself fortunate indeed if I can persuade Virginia to marry me."

For the moment he meant it. Forgetting the prospect of awkward questions as to the girl's family, he thought only of living at Holbeach as heir, thought of the promise of a Parliamentary career. He had, before now, had occasion to note how scrupulously his cousin always kept his word.

Meantime, up on the steep, peaked hill the others were resting after their climb.

The green of forest and blue of sea stretched out below them looked like a brightly colored map, the third color supplied by the deep, rich red of the cliffs. In their youth and strength they all thought more of the joy of the summer day than of that type of woman's extremest sorrow whose figure crowned the hilltop.

Hugh had taken complete possession of Virginia, and Mrs. Tom hung on her husband's arm, so what was there for Esther and Noel in the narrow road but to pair off together? Esther had at first felt that, being brought there for the purpose of talking fossils to Noel, it was her duty to talk of nothing else.

Bravely, though with a slight sense of fatigue, she stuck to her subject, describing hers and her father's finds in different localities.

Presently, she found that he was waxing discursive, and branching out into his experiences on various expeditions, one to Hudson's Bay, another into the Rockies of northern British Columbia. She felt a little glow of success in the fact of his taking the trouble to entertain her, together with the interest she always gave to talk of the big outside world.

After their steep climb they had sat down to rest. There were no trees on the smoothly sloping sides of the pilgrimage hill, nothing but grass, closely cropped by grazing sheep, but up here, with the wind sweeping in from miles of northern sea to gulleys of forested hills beyond, there was no need of shelter from the June sun.

Esther was bareheaded, and the wind stirred her crisp bronze hair as though it loved it. A creature of those great healthy spaces of sunshine and wind she seemed to the man beside her, and all at once he saw a vision of her as mate to one who had chosen the waste places of the earth for his heritage. It was the first time he had

ever thought of a woman as companion in those solitudes, and the idea stirred him strangely.

Meanwhile Esther was listening in lazy content.

"What a Wandering Jew you seem!" she said, as he paused. "Is it love of travel or love of science that sends you off like that?"

"I have a bent toward both, I suppose, though there's a stronger motive-power than either. Just now I'm out on this fossil and specimen hunting job for a western college museum, but my real trade is consulting engineer, and I'm always prospecting 'round on my own account, and some day I'm going to strike a big thing for myself. There're plenty of them tucked away in the North that no man has seen. It may be the diamond mine that hundreds are after nowadays, it may be another Cobalt—anyway, it's got to be something big. Then, when I've once got my hands on it I'll found a small kingdom with settlers. I'll make myself a home there, and find a wife for whom the wilderness has no terrors. Do you think that's too extensive a programme?" he ended with the laugh of a reserved man who has unwittingly opened a crack in the door of his dream-castle.

Esther had listened with the instinctive interest which a girl always gives to an unmarried man's talk of his future home and wife. At twenty-two the potentialities of life are all the more attractive for their vagueness.

"You've got it all mapped out," she commented lightly. "But if you do happen to find that diamond mine, won't you ever let your wife out of the wilderness and give her a trip to London and Paris or even New York?"

"Oh yes. We'll go to some of those places every year in the opera season. Music is about the best thing civilization can give one."

Esther pondered this new phase.

"I've never heard an opera," she said regretfully, then, flushing at her unasked introduction of the personal note, she went on hastily: "But I thought you belonged to the sort of people who have the opera without finding diamond mines. Was it only chaff all that talk of Hugh Tathem's about the millionaire's son?"

Noel looked in no way disturbed by this frank questioning.

"No, my father's a millionaire, all right, but he and I don't see life through just the same spectacles. I want to make my own start in life. I want to be an ancestor instead of a descendant. I want to work as I please, to live and marry as I please."

There was an undoubted earnestness in the words, and Esther glanced curiously into his face before saying:

"What a lot of wants you have!"

"Well, everyone worth while does. Don't you?"

"Oh, lots. But they seem likely to stay wants."

Noel turned on his elbow to look up into the face, unshadowed by futile longings, and as he did so, he recalled Mrs. Tathem's words about Dorval.

"How can you tell?" he said. "You've plenty of time ahead. Have you never been away from Lanse Louise at all?"

"Oh, yes, once!" She laughed a bit forlornly. "Captain Loisons took me on the return trip up the Gulf in the *Chateauguay,* and I stayed with his family in Quebec for a few days. It was rather like seeing a succession of Lanse Louises all the way up. Still, the people on board were fun."

"And the people you knew in Quebec?"

"They weren't fun exactly. I only knew French people and they seemed to spend most of their time going to church."

"That wasn't what you'd call lively."

"No, but the Loisons' were as kind as they could be. They always are. Why, when Jack LeRoy got back to Quebec half starved after his tramp through the woods, they took him right in and looked after him."

Noel smiled to himself to see how entirely she took it for granted that everyone must know of Jack LeRoy's ill-fated expedition. As it happened, he had heard the tale on the *Wenonah* where Holbeach and the Tathems had discussed it and its bearings on the future. Now he was inclined to experimentalize on the subject.

"I'm curious to get a sight of this Jack LeRoy," he said. "His adventures seem an Homeric epic. I wonder if he'll start out again on the long trail."

"Why on earth should he?" she demanded quickly.

There was no doubt that Esther was startled by the suggestion, and immediately Noel wondered if LeRoy instead of Dorval would be the man to open the door into the world for her. Well, whichever it was, he was a lucky man, he decided.

"Exactly so. Why should he?" he agreed, seeing that the talked-of expedition was still a well-kept secret.

Just then Mrs. Tom hailed them with a reminder of their distance from luncheon, and the homeward move began.

After that morning, pairing off did not seem so simple a process as before.

In the after-lunch lounge on deck Giles established himself in the hammock-chair beside Virginia, and conscientiously tried to arouse her interest in his morning's experiences. He was proud of his little joke about the priestly liqueur that had never paid duty. To his surprise, Virginia looked grave.

"Oh, but please," she said nervously, "you'd better

not talk about that. You see, you don't know who the people are, and you might let just the wrong person hear of it, and it would do Father LeMoyne harm—"

"Well, but surely you don't approve of his smuggling?" Giles asked, trying not to show how scandalized he was.

"Oh, but he didn't smuggle it himself. It was just some poor sailor's present to him, and you know they all do it here. Surely there can't be much harm in it!" she pleaded.

"Dear me!" was Giles' helpless comment.

Their points of view were too hopelessly apart and he fell back upon tales of London theaters and shops. It was not easy to arouse Virginia's interest in the latter. Everything she wanted in the way of dainty clothing had always come to her so easily, by a letter to a Montreal dressmaker, that she had never known the feminine craving for finery. She was growing decidedly sleepy when Hugh appeared with prints of yesterday's photos, and squatted at her feet for a joint inspection of them. Giles looked at their heads so close together, heard their little outburst of laughter, and felt a growing distaste for their youthful spirits. The strong sea air made him sleepy, after his morning walk and good luncheon, and he thought wistfully of his cabin sofa, of some unread magazines and papers. Surely, he needn't be perpetually trying to talk to the girl! A glance around the deck showed that Holbeach was absent and emboldened him to make a retreat.

But there were other times within the next twenty-four hours when Giles was more persevering, and Hugh, even with Mrs. Tom's help, did not win so easy a victory.

Then, if Virginia found herself bored by her cousin, she was apt to get Esther away to herself, thereby upsetting more than one little arrangement.

The *Wenonah* had turned her head homeward and about sunset she rounded the lighthouse bar and came in sight of the Basin and its rim of white houses shining in the evening light.

"Oh, there's the Bluff House! I wonder if Miss Creighton's on the lookout for us?" said Virginia in a tone befitting a month's absence.

"Why, I believe you're glad to be back again!" said Esther, leaning on the rail beside her.

"Polite, isn't she!" put in Hugh in an injured tone. Such injury was a luxury he seldom indulged in, but when he did, it was done thoroughly.

"Oh, it wasn't that," Virginia explained with sudden confusion; "but then, you see, it's home, and the dogs and Miss Creighton. Even though we enjoyed ourselves so much, it will be nice to be home tonight, won't it, Esther?"

"I don't know," said her friend soberly. "You see, for me it means a lot more—work, for instance."

Noel was loitering near, listening, and somehow he did not think it was the prospect of work that cast that anticipative shadow over the girl's face. He seemed to have fallen into a way of seeing Esther's point of view.

CHAPTER XIV

UP THE RIVER

THE next day Holbeach and his daughter set forth betimes into a shining, dew-pearled morning world. Their salmon rods showing at the back of the buckboard and their business-like attire revealed their purpose.

Holbeach was going up for the day to his river, to have a first look around, preparatory to starting for his upper camp, and, to Virginia's joy, he had offered to take her with him.

To her amazement, and to her father's secret relief, Giles had pleaded important letters to write. Letters!—when one was under thirty and the river called one!

Holbeach, being a clear-sighted man, was beginning to realize the flimsiness of his air-castle for Virginia's future, and, somehow, that realization distressed him less that he should have expected. Hugh Tathem was the son of an old friend, of ample means for the limited career he had chosen, and if the two took a fancy to each other there would be little to complain of.

"Do you think it's possible that cousin Giles doesn't *want* to go fishing?" Virginia asked as one propounding some awesome heresy.

"It certainly looks like it," Holbeach acknowledged with a laugh; then, in attempted excuse:

"You must remember that there are a good many people in England with more important work to do in the

world than to vagabondize at the end of a rod, as you and I do, young woman! Your cousin will probably end by being a big man some day. He's a hard worker, which I never was."

"Is he?" she answered vaguely, then added inconsequently: "I'm glad I was brought up here instead of in England."

"You're sure of that? You're sure you've always been content here in Lanse Louise?"

She altogether failed to mark the earnestness of the question.

"Of course I am! Why on earth shouldn't I be?" she returned in cheerful matter-of-factness.

For a moment Holbeach thought only of his satisfaction in the fact that at least he had given her a happy childhood, then, realizing that it might suit his purpose presently to turn her desires toward England, he asked:

"And haven't you ever thought you would like to come and see where I lived in England?"

Virginia's heart gave a leap of dismay as she recalled Jack's words: "I wonder if your father will be taking you back in the fall." Somehow it did not seem so easy to "just tell him that she didn't want to go."

"Well, you see, I've never known what it would be like—" she hesitated with an anxious glance up at him.

Holbeach laughed at her caution.

"Oh, one place is pretty much like another," he said casually. He had no wish to start anything definite yet, and at his tone, Virginia's cheerfulness returned.

They drove on, past little white cottages in their strips of forest-reclaimed fields, to the head of the Basin, where the York river drowsed amongst rich marsh grasses before joining the salt water. They were bound for the more distant St. John, and so followed the steep hillside

road, washed into gullies by melting snows of spring-tide, through dreary regions of burnt woods where the bare gray-white trees raised their arms like protesting ranks of ghosts. It was not yet time for the red flower of the fire-weed, which alone brightens such desolate places. These barrens left behind, they came to the woods, pungent with all the fresh summer growth. In mingled shadow and sunshine a floral carpet spread under the soaring firs, a carpet woven of ivory-white sheets of dwarf cornel blossoms, intermixed with pink fairy bells of the linnea. Above, thickets of dark spruce were lightened by slim branches of wild pear and cherry blossom, nature's bridal veil of lace-like white tracery. The aromatic scent of a hundred growing things was in the air, and the robins' spring song rang high above the "cluck-cluck" of the woodpeckers and the blackbirds' sly chuckle.

Father's and daughter's spirits were equally attuned to the influence of their surroundings, and, under that influence, the slight constraint, that had sometimes of late come between them, faded away.

Last night Virginia had lain awake longer than usual, wondering how her father would treat Jack, and how the latter would bear himself in his new position.

Oh, how she would *hate* it if her father failed to show that he remembered the boy, for whom in their childish days he always had a kind word, a gift of flies or cartridges, a gift that, careless as it was, aroused the deep-seated gratitude of a child whose joys were few.

She need not have worried. Marcus Holbeach could never have held the place he did with French fishermen of the shores and taciturn, keen-eyed hunters of the inland ranges, but for the unfailing memory and ready tact which were the outward form of that inward grace

of a kindly interest in his fellow-beings, an interest which his increasing cynicism toward those of his own world only seemed to deepen when he found himself back among these forest and sea folk, with whom long ago he had sought shelter from remorseful grief.

The road degenerated into a rough track through the woods that encroached on it with overhanging branches, with creeping undergrowth that the wheels crushed down. But rough as it was, they left it for one still more primitive, turning downhill into serried ranks of spruce that never parted until a glimpse of milky-green water, an all-pervading murmur of sound, told that they had reached their destination.

"Oh, hear it! The river!" Virginia said with a little gasp.

"Why, what an Undine you are!" her father commented, with a curious glance at the face from which the dreamy aloofness had passed.

On the river bank just enough trees had been cleared to leave room for two log huts that almost seemed a part of the forest growth in their sheathing of tawny birch-bark nailed on to the logs, and with crevices stuffed with bleached bronze-green swamp moss. Someone must have been on the lookout, for, though their wheels made no sound on the moss, the horse had not stopped before Jack LeRoy was striding up the bank toward them, Czar at his heels, a certain solemnity of shyness restraining the gladness in his eyes.

Virginia knew at a glance that he had drilled himself to be on duty and that she must not interfere with his pose, but, oh, how satisfyingly familiar he looked with those worn lines, that haggard, haunted look gone from his face. He was tanned and lean as ever, but it was in the normal fashion of a healthy outdoor existence. The

wounds left by his life-and-death struggle with the wilderness had healed and he was himself again.

"So, Jack, you've turned guardian! I hope you like it!" was Holbeach's friendly greeting as he reached a hand to the young fellow.

To him there seemed nothing abnormal in the situation though he could recall days of equal comradeship with Jack's father, that broken-down Jersey gentleman, who, having married a fisherman's daughter from Stewarttown, the Scotch settlement down by the Barrachois, had ended his profitless days in Lanse Louise. This comradeship had entailed substantial aid given in those last years of ill-health and poverty, and Holbeach had always intended to lend Jack a helping hand.

But, somehow, the necessity never seemed to come, for Jack had, from the first, a fashion of falling on his feet. Through his mother's strenuous toil and his own natural aptitude he had won enough education to fit himself for the craft of timber-scaling, and his first set-back had been the failure of this expedition which had apparently opened such a rosy prospect to him.

Jack's well-shaped hand with its hardened palm of toil met Holbeach's more delicate one in a firm clasp, and the bright blue eyes greeted him with frank friendliness.

"I guess it suits me all right for the present, sir. It's a sort of rest cure I'm taking, you see," he responded, set at ease by the other's casualness. He did not doubt but that Mr. Holbeach knew his recent history, but he was glad that he proffered no sympathy.

There was a quick, shy "Good morning" to Virginia, but their interchanged glance was their real greeting.

Virginia had another greeting though. As she jumped from the buckboard and stood looking with satisfaction

from the forest vistas to the opening by the bank and the canoes drawn up thereon, Czar leaped and whined around her in welcome.

"Well, we'll try the rest cure, too!" Holbeach was saying, when he noticed the dog. "That's a fine setter. He seems to know you, Virginia."

"Oh, Czar and I are old friends. He lived at the Bluff House all the time his master was away, didn't you, old man?" and again she bent her head over the dog.

"Indeed!" and it seemed to Jack's quick sensitiveness that Holbeach's comment was somewhat dry, but nothing more was said and they proceeded to the business of the day. With three people who knew that business thoroughly, matters were soon settled.

"You had better fish the Owl's Pool from a canoe, Virginia. Jack can take you, while LaGue comes up the bank with me," Holbeach decided, his motive being to leave his daughter in the surest hands.

Jack could scarcely believe in his good luck in being thus intrusted with the care of Virginia. He had planned to stand carefully aloof and this was the blessed result. From the fullness of his grateful heart he spoke as Virginia settled herself in the canoe:

"I declare, it does one good to see your father 'round again. Nobody's got that way that makes you feel ready to do more'n your best for him, like he has."

A few deft thrusts of Jack's pole took the wooden canoe behind an island point into a shut-in world of swift, agate-colored water, murmuring, rippling over the gravel into nooks and crannies, amongst great barriers of dead trunks and twisted gray roots, while overhead the rustling forest walls nearly met to shut out the softly dappled sky.

There were not overmany words exchanged between

the two, but Jack's keen eyes softened to an infinite content as he watched the slim figure in its clinging dress of rough, white, habitant flannel, and Virginia, savoring the old childish delight in Jack's strength and skill as a latent force behind her, put her whole soul into her congenial task. Deep would have been his gloom if they had returned empty-handed, but presently she was playing a lively ten-pounder while Jack, grasping the gaff, dropped terse, urgent words of advice, his heart in his mouth at every silver flash or wild rush threatening loss. Hearty was his breath of relief when, the struggle over, the doomed fish hung limp on his gaff, to be laid out respectfully on spruce boughs in the canoe bottom, silverly resplendent in death, an aristocrat of nature to the last.

"I knew *you* wouldn't offer to take the rod like any of the others might," Virginia panted triumphantly, as she knelt upright, her hands lightly grasping the thwarts of the canoe.

The strain of the fight showed in her flushed face and the loosened hair that blew about it. At times like this she wore her dark locks hanging in a heavy braid, as in her childish days.

"That's because I know you better than those others. There's never been a day you haven't had the pluck to hold on to the end, even when you were a little kid."

As he spoke Jack looked up from where he still crouched over the vanquished fish, all his adoring soul leaping to his eyes. It was thus that Marcus Holbeach saw the two as he strolled down the opposite bank, saw the new glory in Virginia's face, the tense poise of Jack's figure, and understood in a strange mingling of bitterness and sympathy. To a man who had known women's ways as well as he had, the dog's welcome had been a hint to which the rest was confirmation. So this was the fate

his careless procrastination had wrought for his only child. He had doubly disinherited her of her birthright of name and station, for now she could never be the contented mistress of Holbeach Manor, never, willingly, be Giles' wife. And yet who could tell if the battle were really lost, for had not skillful parental guiding before now led impetuous youth past the tempting opening into the primrose path, on along the broad highroad of worldly prosperity?

"It's merely a question of a light enough hand on the rein," he assured himself to quiet his own misgivings. He had too keen a recollection of the ruthless wreckage of his own youth, ever to lay a rashly desecrating hand on the ark of another's destiny, even if it were his own child's, but as he stood there watching the two making ready to cross the stream and meet him at the landing, he recalled a certain discussion with Dorval over Jack LeRoy's adventures, and resolved that young man should lack no assistance in his scheme of further adventure. Not that Holbeach was the inexorable father of romance, for even now he was well-disposed toward Jack. If he proved to have the stuff in him for success, it would, at the worst, be an easy matter to push him on into a suitable position for Virginia's husband; if he failed, there were months, perhaps years in which to win the girl to bigger aspirations in life before he returned, if he ever did return, to disturb her.

Not a sign of these meditations was visible in Marcus' mildly unperturbed face as he reached a hand to help his daughter up the bank.

"Wasn't I lucky?" she cried gayly, as she stood beside him. "And poor you haven't the ghost of a fish! Had you no rises?"

"Not one. But luck goes to the young," he made half

melancholy answer. That ever present sense of his own day being near its end had been awakened into keenness by this return to the haunts of his earlier manhood.

"This will be the twentieth salmon I've caught. I have them notched on my landing-net handle. Jack, don't forget to mark it presently. It was you who cut the first notch five years ago. Do you remember?" And she turned to him with her old instinctive appeal, an appeal her father was quick to note.

"Yes," was all Jack's answer, but Holbeach thought he saw a deeper color under his tan.

Lunch was the next thing in the order of the day, and that possible awkward moment which two of them at least had foreseen, came when Jack and LaGue, having spread the meal on the rough outdoor table, drew apart to the open-air fire.

On sea and land Holbeach had, in his day, shared many a frugal meal with Indians, rough lumbermen and sailors. Still, the etiquette of a fishing-camp was a settled matter, and not to be lightly disturbed.

All the same, he knew that this was no time to antagonize his daughter by drawing an arbitrary dividing line between her and her childhood's companion. So when Jack made a last trip with a tin of steaming potatoes, he said quietly:

"Set it here, Jack, and sit down with us. I want to hear about your wanderings from yourself. I've only had Mr. Dorval's account so far."

There was a moment's pause, a pause when Virginia kept her eyes glued on the pile of sandwiches before her. When Jack's answer came there was no uncertainty in it.

"Thank you, sir, but I'll just boil the tea now, while LaGue waters the horse. I can tell you later."

Leaving no room for an answer he walked over to the

rude fireplace and Holbeach knew his Lanse Louise folk too well to say more. Nowhere in Canada are better rural manners found than among the soft voices and leisurely movements of these Jersey settlements of the Gulf, manners which make their men much sought after as guides to wealthy American sportsmen, but behind this gentle deliberateness there lurks a shy self-respect which brooks no trifling with.

Jack had his way, and he and LaGue shared a somewhat silent meal, but when pipes were produced, Holbeach strolled over to join them, and between Jack and him began that soul-satisfying talk of fellow-craftsmen. Jack marveled at the tenacious memory that in two years had not forgotten an eddy in a pool, a turn of the stream, and Holbeach respected the thoroughness with which Jack had already patrolled his domain and mastered its lore. The young fellow had produced from his pocket a good working map of his district, and the word of quiet praise to his industry sent a glow to his heart. Holbeach had the rare gift of knowing just the right word to say, and when to say it.

Virginia, sitting on a log watching the eddies' milky-green swirl round a fallen tree, heard her father call:

"I am going to walk up the bank a bit with LeRoy"—he did not say Jack now—"to see about cutting away that dead timber that blocks the east channel. You can fish for a bit with LaGue if you like, only be careful."

"All right, father," she answered, in the content of seeing things going well between the two rival influences of her life.

As yet she had hardly put the consciousness of certain new facts into definite form. She only acknowledged to herself that she wanted Jack to be always near her, a comrade ever at hand to call on. In a lesser degree she

wished to please and satisfy her father, wished to feel that he approved of her, and her dress and manners, though, luckily for her, she had a most inadequate idea of the elaborate luxury of the standard he had to compare her with. It was a far cry from Lady Warrenden in the thick of the London season in her Pont Street house, to Virginia by the log cabin on the St. John.

Holbeach, known as a brilliant conversationalist when he chose to exert himself, now employed his skill to lead Jack on to frank self-revelation. He wanted him to broach the idea of a further expedition without open suggestion from him. In this he was successful. During these weeks of solitary meditation, in tramps on dewy mornings by forest paths, or twilight canoe trips on the river, Jack's recent past had been shaping itself into true perspective.

Hardships and disappointments faded into the background, and the possibilities of ultimate success took more definite shape. The timber was there, he knew, and the minerals as well, he firmly believed, and as soon as he had got a little money together again he meant to go and see what could be done in this new field. Meanwhile, he pored, in odd moments, over a tattered manual of geology he had found at home among his father's few books, applying his ready if not brilliant wits to learning the lesson of the rocks, in preparation for a needed day. It was not easy to speak of these cherished plans but, as he would have said, Mr. Holbeach had a way with him, and he found himself drawing a glowing picture of the accessibility of what Moses Flynn, the miner, called "one of the richest little nooks in God's earth, anyway, here in Canada, p'rhaps a new Cobalt, for all they knew."

"If only I hadn't been such a fool as to let him go out of my sight," he ended.

"But you could find the spot without him?" Holbeach suggested.

"Yes, but I'd find it a smart sight better with him along, an' when I got there is the time I'd be needin' him the most."

"And you don't know where he is?"

Holbeach's reconstructed air-castle seemed in as shaky a condition as ever.

"Oh, yes. I guess a letter would find him up in new Ontario. He wrote me after he got to that mining place —Gowganda, they call it—and he seemed fixed there steady."

"And you think he's reliable?"

"Old Moses? Yes, sir, as steady as a cartload of bricks. An' it wasn't all Christmas puddin' that he and I had the eatin' of together. Oh, yes, I'd stake all I'd got on his word, any day."

Holbeach had been doing some rapid thinking, and now spoke decisively:

"Well, then, listen to me a bit. Mr. Dorval has been talking to Mr. Tathem and me about this find of yours. He thinks it may be a thing worth going in for, and we're inclined to agree with him. If you will go off in the next boat, hunt up this miner and his specimens, and bring him to meet some consulting engineer we choose, and he thinks the matter promising, we'll take up the mining rights and fit you out for another trip up there, and, anyway, if they don't care to join in, I'll do the thing myself. What do you say to that?"

Apparently Jack had nothing to say, but stood staring intently at the swift flash of a blue kingfisher as it dived from a white-blossomed mountain ash overhanging a sheer slope of slatey rock. Years after, Jack remembered the golden-brown shadow of the rock on the water and

the white slur of light that the bird struck out from it.

Some instinct seemed to warn him that he might be binding himself to certain renunciations by an obligation to Mr. Holbeach, and bade him pause, as Dorval's words recurred to him: "Remember that you are putting yourself in the position of Mr. Holbeach's servant."

Well, that worked two ways now. The way to free himself and win independence and a chance of something even dearer still, something the mere thought of which made his heart thump and his cheek burn, lay before him, and here he was hesitating.

"I say that if you trust me, sir, I'll do all a man can to pull the thing through. I never counted on such a chance."

The words were spoken with the abruptness of real feeling and, in spite of himself, Holbeach's heart warmed to the young fellow.

"That's all right, then," he agreed heartily, and Giles would have considered his relative more eccentric than ever could he have read his thoughts.

CHAPTER XV

A FRESH START

FOR the first time since trusting his child to Miss Creighton's care, Marcus Holbeach felt that he had a definite duty to undertake for her beyond lodging money in the bank for her expenses, and in contradistinction to his usual dilatoriness he lost no time in setting about its discharge. The Tathems were starting the next morning for their camp on the York, and after dinner, in the long, mellow twilight, an informal conclave was held on Dorval's veranda. Of the five men, Holbeach and Dorval were most familiar with the details of Jack's story, but Tom Tathem's legally trained mind was forceful to grasp the salient points of any affair that interested him, and Hugh's fancy was caught by the touch of adventure-book romance the tale contained. As for Noel, his angular form twisted up in one of Dorval's straight-backed habitant armchairs, he seemed to come as audience, though it was not easy to tell how far he was fulfilling that duty while he puffed at his pipe in his shadowed corner.

"I might as well tell you," began Holbeach, after the first discussion of probabilities, "that I've made up my mind if there seems in the least a decent prospect ahead, to let LeRoy have his chance, even if you others decide to leave it alone. Of course, it would have to be on a smaller scale——"

"There is no need to consider that," Dorval broke in; "if he goes, I do my share."

"So do I!" said Hugh, eager to get ahead of any prudent suggestions from his brother. "And I tell you what, I've a great mind to go along with him," he added with a defiant glance toward Tom's bulk.

"And resign your commission?" asked his brother dryly. "It strikes me you've had about all the leave you're likely to get this year."

"So I have, confound it!" Hugh agreed gloomily. He was a senior lieutenant in the Canadian artillery, and every detail of his military life was equally dear to him, from his maple-leaf buttons to the big khaki-colored guns in the Quebec citadel. Tom Tathem had a paternal pride in his more volatile younger brother, though he often considered it his duty to act as drag on his impulses.

Hugh having subsided, Tom went on:

"I fancy there's a lot of water to run under the bridge, before it comes to any one setting out. Our object now is to lie low until we've secured our mining rights for the promised land, and we can't do that until we know our locality. Still, if Jack can produce his miner and his specimens, there's a consulting engineer I know in Montreal who's a most reliable chap——"

"I always supposed I was all that, too," came in a melancholy drawl from Noel's corner. "I really think some of my friends in conclave might suggest giving me the job, and so spare my modesty from having to point out my own professional suitability——"

Hugh laughed derisively. "Pity the sorrows of the unemployed plutocrat," he jeered.

Without noticing him, Noel went on with mild insistence:

"I don't mean that I want merely to sit in judgment on

the men's story and assay their specimens. I'd like to put my widow's mite into the venture if it comes off, and what's more, I want to go along with this pet lamb of yours and see his Land of Promise for myself. I've been prowling round for awhile looking for some first-class opening——"

It was Holbeach who answered with the amiable impatience we give to a child intruding its own affairs on a serious discussion:

"My dear fellow, this isn't a joke. Cyrus Noel's son can hardly need minnows like us to give him an opening. Of course, I quite see that you would like the fun of such an expedition——"

"I'm not out looking for fun to-day, thank you," was the undisturbed retort. "I'm after just what I fancy LeRoy is: a chance at a career. As for my father," all at once Noel's voice had a new gravity in it, "I haven't seen the color of a dollar of his since I left college."

"The more fool you," put in Hugh, the irrepressible, his words ending in a grunt of pain as his brother dealt a silencing kick to his shins.

"That's the way to instill discretion into him, Tom," was Noel's comment on this side-play.

"You see," he went on, "my father's spare cash is invested in my half-sisters' English baronet and French marquis—he finds them expensive luxuries, too. Anyway, my mother's money gives me enough to buy cigarettes and grub round the waste places of the earth looking for a future. So I just about seem to fit in here—that is, if you think so," and he looked toward Holbeach, who appeared chosen by universal consent as chairman of their informal committee.

"Oh, certainly," the latter agreed. He had noticed the

queer tinge of respect that underlay Tom Tathem's affectionate familiarity with his college friend, and he felt sure that his present silence had nothing in it of doubt as to the other's capability.

"Then, supposing we agree that as soon as LeRoy wires he has caught his hare, I join them in Quebec and report my impressions. My friend Tom will, I think, answer that I'm fit for the job."

"Of course, my dear fellow," was Tom's hearty response, and the rest agreed in chorus.

Both the older men were quick to feel the change from whimsical desultoriness to business decision in Noel.

"Let me point out, too," he said, "that the less time we lose in the matter, the better. Every hour has its chance of the plum, if plum there be, dropping into another mouth and leaving us gaping."

"That's so," agreed Dorval.

And so the affair was decided that night, and early the next morning Jack, working busily at a bark roof to the outdoor dining-room at the lower camp, his mind in a turmoil over his prospects, was surprised by the advent of one of the men engaged by Holbeach as guides, with a note from the latter that abruptly cut short his occupation. It directed him to hand over his work to the bearer and, returning in his buckboard, make ready to set out in the boat leaving the next morning.

Jack obeyed with the simple promptness which was part of his nature when he trusted, and the two men whom he trusted most in the world were Holbeach and Dorval.

Those never-to-be-forgotten last months of his father's life, when that handsome, attractive ne'er-do-well was journeying the last grim stages of a drunkard's death, would have graven their mark still deeper on

mother and son but for Dorval's constant helpfulness and Holbeach's generosity.

That time was never alluded to between Mrs. LeRoy and Jack, but whenever either spoke the name of the two men who had befriended them, the other was quick to feel the memory it implied.

So now it was doubly good to Jack that these two should be ready to believe in him, they and the Tathems, with whom he had sailed and fished in the equality of boyhood.

Here was his chance, and if a vision of Virginia's wistful eyes caused him to choke, he still knew that he had rather be separated from her by rivers and forests than by the impalpable but real barrier that lay between the guardian on her father's river, or even the skillful timber-scaler and the young lady of the Bluff House.

Over morning and evening pipes, on the river bank, by his log hut, or guiding his canoe downstream, he had faced and fought out the question.

No other woman, he believed, could ever be to him what Virginia was, but, all the same, he felt that he must not attempt to make love to her, must even avoid her, hard as it would be. And so there was a mixed tumult of emotions at work all that day behind the attention he gave to the practical details of his preparations. There was the vague hope of what success might bring him, mingled with boding thought of his last interview with Virginia. Surely, Fate could not be so unkind as to prevent that meeting.

That busy day passed, and the long summer dusk found him on the Bluff House veranda, answering Dorval's and Holbeach's last questions, answering carefully with his surface sense, while every nerve was tingling with consciousness of the slim, white figure sitting a little

apart in a deep rocking-chair. A ray from a primrose-shaded lamp came through the open French window of the sitting-room, drawing a line across her knee and the tanned wrists and hands lying so still on it.

It seemed to Jack's fancy that there was something pathetically appealing in the stillness of those hands that he knew so swift and skillful at paddle or rod.

"Yes, I'll wire just as soon as ever I lay hands on him, and I'll bet my boots old Moses Flynn won't have given the thing away," he heard himself saying in answer to last cautions.

"You're off at daylight. Do you sleep on board to-night, Jack?" asked Dorval, perhaps with a desire to end a scene of which he felt the strain.

How aghast Jack would have been if he had guessed that both the older men were as conscious of the situation as he himself. Luckily for him, neither of them had allowed certain pangs, bravely endured in their younger days, to crystalize into bitterness, but, remembering their own dark hours of renunciation, they dealt gently with him now.

"Yes, and I've my dunnage to fetch across and had better be off," Jack said as bravely as he might through his bitter disappointment.

He had hoped to the last that chance might give him one word alone with Virginia. But Holbeach, though pitiful, was inexorable, and had carefully kept his daughter near him all that evening. For her sake, there must be no rashly irrevocable farewell words spoken. She, as well as Jack, must have her chance.

"Well, don't let us keep you," Holbeach said, then looking round toward that silent, white figure, he spoke in a voice that through her absorption touched the girl with its new gentleness:

"Come, Virginia, and wish Jack good luck and a safe return. If you get a mine it must be called the Virginia, Jack."

The young fellow's heart leaped at this joining of his beloved's name with his venture. For a moment he thought to read some significance in it, and then common sense scoffed at the hope.

In the dusk Jack could dimly see the outlines of the pale face and big dark eyes, while her simple murmured words thrilled his heart:

"Good-bye, Jack. Come back soon," and her hand clung to his in a warm, soft pressure. There was a little package, too, that she left in his grasp, and somehow, it was that unknown token that enabled Jack to play the man and get away, hurrying down through the darkening woods to the landing where he and Virginia had met on that May morning, so few short weeks ago.

By the wan light of a young moon, veiled by scurrying drift, Jack peered into a little leather case, though he had to strike a match before he could see the grave eyes looking out at him with all their tender trust.

"God bless her," he muttered, as he sent his canoe forward against the lapping waves.

An hour later, his sailor's bag lay ready at the cottage door, and his mother stood facing him, the glare from the unshaded lamp full upon her face, set with restrained feeling. Her work-worn hands, that for all her striving were tremulous, held a roll of dingy bank-notes.

"Then you won't take it?" she said almost harshly. "Think again, for, 'deed an' truth, I won't be needin' it."

Jack laid a hand on hers holding the money.

"No, indeed, mother. I'd be poor stuff if I took what you've worked so hard for."

" 'Twas for you," she muttered.

"'Good-bye, Jack. Come back soon,' and her hand clung to his."

"I know. But I'll be the easier up there for knowing you've got that, against illness or such. You see, Mr. Holbeach and Mr. Dorval have backed me up an' I don't mind takin' their help when I've good hopes of winning them double."

" 'Twas Mr. Holbeach as first wantcd you to go?" she asked with sudden change of interest.

"I don't know—they were all in it—well, yes, I suppose it *was* him——"

"Maybe he don't want you to come back."

Jack started and flushed darkly.

"Mother! What do you mean? You know what he's done for us before now!" he protested almost sternly.

She winced even at this slight touch on old sores, but held her ground.

"Yes, I know. But—tell me—did ye see Virginia tonight?"

Her voice softened at the word, and her son bent to the change.

"I saw her—there, with the others. That was all."

The bitterness of the thought was for a moment unsuppressed, then he added half to himself:

"But it was best so."

"Best so!" and a storm-signal sounded in her voice. "Best that the child should be frettin' her heart out, as she did last winter, an' him, as hasn't even guv her an honest name——"

Jack stared at her almost in dread.

"Stop! You're sure crazy, mother!" he stammered.

" 'Deed, an' I'm not, then! Haven't ye ever wondered why he kept his only child here alone in the woods while he himself is a great gentleman over in England with more houses than he can live in? No, ye didn't know that, an' I didn't mean ever to tell you——"

"Why did you tell me now, mother?"

For all the quiet of the words the question had an insistent force in it.

The face he looked into showed no irresolution.

"For what else but that ye may know the child's need of a man to care for her. Marcus Holbeach's dead and gone sins and sorrows aren't nothing to me. The Lord judge them mercifully for his goodness to me and mine! But look you, mind you"—her voice shook with feeling—"this is told you to make you see as you, a gentleman's son, is a fitting mate for her, for all her father's money, an' to make you work for her, an' come back to her, so that I may see you happy man an' wife. The child needs you, I tell you, an' don't you forget it."

Wrath with Holbeach, pity and love for Virginia, joy at her need of him, had swept over Jack, as varying winds sweep the sea, but now one purpose alone had full possession of him.

"God bless you, mother, for telling me!" he said simply. "I was fool enough to think I owed it to her father to go. Now, I owe him nothing save honest work. Then, when I can make her a home, if she'll take it—oh, I'll work for it as man never worked before. Good-bye, mother!"

He seized his bundle, and vanished into the soft darkness, Mrs. LeRoy standing, a resolute figure, staring out toward the steamer's lights at the wharf across the Basin.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE DAWNING

THE Fates worked a difference in more than one destiny when they decreed that in the small hours of the short summer night the mail-boat engines should develop some of those obstructive tendencies to which aged machinery is subject.

And the machinery of the *Strathcona* could hardly be blamed if it felt it deserved a rest after so many seasons' grind against the Gulf tides. The Captain, a much more work-a-day specimen of a Quebec pilot than Captain Loisons, stormed up and down the deck, using vigorous pre-Revolution Norman oaths that would have delighted the heart of an etymologist, while every fresh time the engineer was hailed on deck to beard him, the latter's aspect was grimier and more suggestive of a longing for suicide.

Over one person all the commotion passed unheeded.

Jack LeRoy, in solitary possession of the forward deck, now pacing up and down, now sitting on a bench by the rail, his chin resting on his arms, had watched out the night hours. The dew was heavy, and a wind blew in chill from the Gulf, but he felt he could not go below and sleep while, sitting here in the darkness, he might still savor his nearness to his heart's treasure.

Last time he had not thought it easy to go, and yet

how infinitely easier it had been then than now, when his mother's words rang in his ears: "The child needs you, I tell you, an' don't you forget it!" As if there were any chance of a man forgetting such words!

Mrs. LeRoy's revelation as to Virginia's birth had changed all the familiar aspect of life, as gathering clouds on mountains veil one familiar peak and bring another into unguessed-of prominence. Just a few hours ago he had been so proud of Holbeach's trust, so loyal in his determination to hold aloof from disturbing Virginia's quietude until he could make a justifying place for himself, and now his heart was hard as stone toward the man who he felt had wronged her. Ten years hence he might judge less harshly, in masculine fashion; now, it was inevitable that life should have made him somewhat narrow.

It was hardly to be wondered at that the boyish remembrance of his attractive, irresponsible father's sordidly tragical ending should have developed a certain puritanical vein in him, a vein that would pass with the fuller development of the years.

Keeping his night watch, Jack saw a dim little light over in the gloom of the opposite shore, which told that his mother, too, was awake. How different the weary night watch of age from the turbulent yet hopeful vigil of youth!

Over on the French Bluff, where the mouth of the Basin narrowed, one of the guiding harbor lights shone, and just above it the blackness of the trees hid the Bluff House. Was there one waking there for his sake, he wondered. A tide of new tenderness swelled his breast, and nothing seemed too marvellous beside the thought that Virginia should have fretted for his absence.

Wrapped in the visions and longings of his young man-

hood, Jack saw the stars pale in the eastern sky, saw the slow flush creep upward and the curve of the hills change from black to royal purple above his beloved's home. Incoherently he felt that pageant of the dawn to be meet symbol of his love.

The golden radiance had spread over the sky when irate voices near at hand broke in on his absorption.

"And you mean to say we shan't get off before six or seven?" The voice was that of a commercial traveler well known in Lanse Louise, and it was the Captain who answered him:

"That is exactly what I do mean to say, sir. If you have any objections to make, I refer you to the engineer, who seems not to know how to manage his own machinery, or to the Minister of Marine at Ottawa, who sees fit to employ antiquated tubs for the carriage of the King's mails."

In this torrent of words Jack seized on one fact: the boat might not start before six or seven, and it was now little after half-past four. He had ample time to indulge the instinctive longing that drew him like a magnet.

If there were any more definite hope of a meeting behind that longing he did not put it into shape.

"*Dis-donc*. Remember, I wait not a minute, not if it were for Sir Wilfred himself, after those *sacré* engines work," shouted the Captain behind him, as he went down the gangway, but he paid no heed.

He spied a wooden canoe, with a pole in it, drawn up on the landing and, taking possession of it, sent the light craft flying swiftly over the shallows toward the Bluff House.

What he meant to do when he got there, he scarcely knew, but he left that to Fate.

And Fate was ready with the answer. It had been

Virginia's first wakeful night, and through the hours her spirit had answered the call of his.

Rousing from a troubled doze as the first light flooded her room, she sprang up with a definite purpose fully formed in her mind. The mail-boat was to sail at daylight, and she would hurry down to the landing and watch it pass.

In these early summer dawns it was nothing unusual for her to slip into her bathing dress, as she did now, and, wrapping herself in a long, red cloak, run down to the shore for her morning plunge, but never before had she passed by dewy garden and woods with the same desperate heart-craving for one more word, for one more sight, never with the same pallid face and heavy eyes.

As the sun tipped the Gaspé hills, brimming water and forest with fresh radiance, it lit up that slim red figure poised on the top step of the long flight leading from the bathing-house down to the landing. Like priestess of a temple watching the sacred sun-rising, she hovered there, but her gaze was turned westward, up the Basin, where she had been quick to note the boat still at the landing, with no steam up. At once she guessed what had happened, for such breakdowns were no uncommon thing on the *Strathcona.*

Almost in the same moment that Jack saw the red, sunlit figure and sent his little craft leaping over the water with a swift thrust of his pole, she had caught sight of him and went flying down the steep, wooden steps to the landing.

A wandering puff of wind caught the loose knot of her hair, spreading it adrift over her shoulders, and swept back the cloak, showing a glimpse of slim limbs and white arms. Was it a wonder that Jack's blood surged to his head and his heart thumped against his ribs?

"Oh, Jack! Jack! You've come back to me! . . . You won't go away and leave me!" she gasped, catching his arm as with a skillful stroke he rounded the canoe in to the landing.

"Take care!" he said, steadying her with one hand. Then, jumping out, his arms were around her, all thoughts of duty and prudence cast to the winds, as she clung to him. They belonged to each other, and nothing should separate them now.

One first long kiss had been given, before he whispered hoarsely:

"Virginia, I've *got* to go. Don't you know that I'm thankful to go and work like a slave so as to make them believe I'm fitter for you. I know you're sweet enough not to mind my being rough an' poor, because you know no one could love you more than I do, but I've got some day to be able to show your father that I can make a home for you—not fit for you, nothing I could do would be that . . . but . . ."

She slipped a hand up to his neck and broke in, a note of pain in her voice:

"Father! What do I matter to him! He never wanted me with him like other girls' fathers do. I've got only you, Jack."

"And, before God, I'll never fail you," he breathed fervently.

Then Love taught him a strange new lesson of unselfishness. If he went away leaving Virginia out of tune with her home influences, she might be more completely his in spirit, but at the cost of a certain solitary bitterness. Worst of all, if she got thinking of her and her father's mutual relations she might somehow or other hit on the truth.

And so, driving back his sense of her wrong for fear

the last breath of it might reach her, he spoke bravely: "But, Virginia, you mustn't go fancying things about your father not wanting you. Just think of his saying last night that if we find a mine we might call it after you! Could anything be grander than that? Why, it will just make me work like twenty!"

At this she promptly forgot all save him, in the world-old fashion of man and woman finding their mate.

"But you won't overwork yourself, Jack, and you'll take lots of provisions with you this time?" she urged.

He laughed out with great show of courage.

"Why, we're going to have everything we can want, thanks to Mr. Dorval and your father. And we may have a trail made and a settlement begun before the winter, so you'll be sure not to worry, and you'll trust your father, won't you? As far as I can see, he's done his best for you so far, an' perhaps there've sometimes been snags in the stream no one's known of save himself."

Some significance in his words seemed to reach the girl, and she put her head back and looked up into his face, asking quickly:

"What do you mean by that, Jack?"

Seeing his mistake, he hastened to reassure her:

"Nothin' exactly, only it's not always plain sailing for anybody, and I expect our lives, rich and poor, are more even than we guess."

A sudden shrill whistle rent the air and he started round.

"Jove, they've got steam up, and the Captain's in such a tantrum that nothing would please him better than leaving some one behind. It mustn't be me!"

Then the sense of imminent parting swept over them both. Very gently he took her into his arms, while she clung as though she could not loose her hold.

His cheek was against her hair as he whispered:

"Before I go, tell me you wouldn't mind setting off to live in the woods with a rough fellow like me, an' leaving your home and all your pretty things behind."

"I only want you, Jack."

His fingers toyed tenderly with her loose hair.

"Sometimes I feel hardly fit to come near you."

A desperate little laugh broke in.

"Well, you are near me now!"

"Ah, yes, but it's over! God bless you, child!"

The clasp of his arms was loosened, and, turning resolutely away, he leaped into the boat, and with a long shoulder-thrust sent her flying along under the shadow of the cliff.

It was none too soon, for the *Strathcona* was already backing out from the wharf, and Jack had to run the canoe alongside and clamber up, abandoning his little craft to whoever would rescue it.

Virginia had sunk to the edge of the landing-stage, her feet overhanging the water, all her heart in her eyes, as she watched for that supreme moment, when, on the steamer's deck, he would pass close by.

It came, and for a brief space they stared at each other without wave of hand or any interchanged signal. Then the space between them widened and, as the boat curved, she was left watching its churning wake.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SABINE FAMILY

ONE of Humphrey Noel's peculiarities was the unannounced and almost furtive fashion in which his comings and goings were accomplished. According to this habit, on the day the Tathems went up to their river and the yacht sailed, he appeared unexpectedly at the hotel with his scanty belongings.

Esther was away from the house at the time, having, at an early hour, started in the dirty, puffing little ferry-boat to cross the bay on a search for provisions among the French farmhouses.

It was late afternoon when she got back, and as she climbed the road from the wharf, her spirits were somewhat below their usual serenity. Perhaps a consciousness of a general sootiness from the ferry, together with a tousledness of hair from buffeting winds, was the cause of this, for Esther loved her appointments to be dainty; perhaps the sight, an hour ago, of the Tathems' yacht heading seaward was accountable for a general sense of the flatness of things. Though she did not look up at the hotel, she knew that a man was sitting on the veranda, and took him for granted as one of the commercial travelers forever coming and going by the shore roads in their buggies. This would necessitate a few minutes' smiling talk before she could get away to her room for a good wash, and perhaps a rest over a novel. Usually,

such an effort was second nature to her, but to-day it seemed tiresome. All the same, when she reached the steps and looked up it was with a resolute, cheerful face.

Instead of some under-sized, swarthy Quebec Frenchman, in shabby black coat and dingy linen, beaming upon her with his chair comfortably tilted back and his feet on the veranda railing, she saw Noel rise and come to meet her with courteous alacrity.

"He must be waiting for letters or something," she assured herself, feeling the while that things had not so completely lost their effervescence as she had imagined.

"So you have deigned to turn up at last," he complained as they met. "I don't see why you chose the very day that I came to put myself under your protection, to vanish into space. It hardly seems fair, does it?"

"Well, but—under my protection?" she repeated in perplexity, her hand still in his.

"Don't look so scared! I haven't chopped up the cabin boy or spilt the soup on Miss Tathem's best frock and fled from my crime—I've fled from nothing worse than a fishing-rod. I knew if I went up that river I'd be made to fish, and I don't want to—never meant to. Why, with fossils waiting for me all round the shore, should I sacrifice myself to friendship? I put it to myself. Result, here I am. Tom will forgive me after long years, I suppose." As he spoke, Esther was thinking that he was younger and better-looking than she had fancied. The wrinkles on his face somehow emphasized its pleasantness when he smiled.

"But do you mean you've come to *stay* here, in the house?" she demanded.

"Exactly so. I took possession at one o'clock dinner. If you don't believe me, come and see my name in the register."

"All right, I will," she said, as he followed her in to the little office.

Esther was laughing, with that sense of youthful well-being to which a laugh comes easily.

All at once she was checked by the sight of Mrs. Sabine's gray-robed figure, as she stood looking down intently on the open book they had been seeking. Even as Esther wondered at her mother's occupation, she turned at the sound of their footsteps, and the girl felt a sudden chill wave of coming misfortune wafted to her from the icy misery of that still face.

She had grown used to the shadow of old, unhappy, far-off things in those somber hazel eyes, but surely, such suffering as she now saw must be something new and actual. Her age and disposition made her habitually, if tacitly, impatient of what she considered to be intangible, if not forgettable, sorrows, but now, surely this was a different matter. With a swift, new fear at heart, she peered through the open door of the family sitting-room and saw that it was empty.

Usually, at this leisurely hour, Mr. Sabine was dozing in his armchair, over a newspaper.

"Where's father?" she said hastily, with a little catch of her breath.

If Mrs. Sabine recognized her fear she gave no sign of doing so, unless it were in the promptness of her answer.

"He's lying down in his room. He had one of those attacks of his just before dinner, but he's better now," she said in her usual even voice, with just the slightest increase of a certain lifelessness that marked it in tired moments.

"No," she said with a checking motion of her hand, as Esther was turning to the stairs, "he's sleeping now, and

you'd better not disturb him. By and by you can take him a cup of tea when he wakes."

Esther had never disputed her mother's quiet directions, and now she made no protest, but, as Mrs. Sabine left the room without a glance at Noel, she sank, a somewhat forlorn figure, into the well-worn armchair by the office desk.

In her hand she still held a spray of creamy-blossomed moosewood she had gathered, but the shade-loving flowers were drooping from the effect of sun and wind. Noel had perched himself on the table corner, and sat gazing down at her contemplatively.

"Did you see my father when you came?" she asked, looking up with a new idea.

"Yes, and he seemed fit as a fiddle then. Talked a lot and took me in there to his fossil shelves——"

"Well, but when——" she interrupted.

"I went up to my room for a book I wanted to show him, and when I came down he was just where you're sitting, with his arms and head on the book—see, it blotted my name a bit, and spoiled my fine autograph." She took no notice of his attempted lightness of tone.

"Was he alone?" she asked.

"No, your mother was with him, and seemed to know what to do. At any rate, when I offered my services she refused them."

"She never likes any one but herself to be with him when he's ill. She always sends me away," Esther said in quick apology. Somehow, she had gathered an impression that the refusal had not been over-gracious.

"I dare say it's wisest to keep people as quiet as possible," he agreed. In reality, he had been rather taken aback when Mrs. Sabine rejected with such quiet finality his offer to help her husband to an easier position.

It was not Noel's way to take much interest in the peculiarities of the people he drifted among on his wandering career, but to-day he was haunted by the likeness and the difference between two faces, between hazel eyes, past-shadowed and inscrutable, and hazel eyes, frank and eager in their expectant outlook.

"Through deep waters!" he muttered as, Esther having gone upstairs, he strolled back to the veranda seat and lit another cigarette.

Twice, at short intervals, Esther, peering into her father's room, was met by the blankness of closed eyelids and immobile face, a temporary blankness which in the old and wayworn is apt to startle the beholder with its semblance of the blankness which, when it comes, will not be temporary.

The third time, she was rewarded by greeting eyes and the familiar, fluttering smile. She had thought her father paler than ever, while he slept, but now, as his eyes met hers, there flickered on his cheekbones that vivid flush she had learned to dread. Winking back the sudden tears, she perched herself on the bedside, saying cheerily:

"Why Daddy, the fossil man must have been too much for you!"

Even this poor little joke seemed to excite her father. His thin, delicately shaped hand caught hers in a nervous grasp.

"No, no, child! He didn't say so, did he?"

Used to these little sensibilities over trifles, Esther soothed him good-naturedly.

"Of course he wouldn't say anything so silly, Daddy. I was only joking."

"Of course, of course, you were only joking," he repeated more quietly. "The fact is I felt dizzy all the morning."

"You've been stooping over the flower beds in the sun when I wasn't there to look after you, you naughty old man," she adjured him.

"I dare say, I dare say," he agreed. Then, with signs of renewed excitement:

"Do you like that young man, Esther? Did you see much of him on board the *Wenonah?*"

His vivid blue eyes searched her face, and Esther felt the poor thin hand burn on hers. Surely, he must be feverish, she decided. She would not talk much to him, though it was better to seem to chatter a little before she left him to rest.

"Yes, I think I did. You see, that's what I was taken for—to talk fossils to him. He was always kind to me, too, when the others were busy. Why did you ask, father?" she added, with new curiosity.

"Nothing, nothing." Then, more dreamily: "He's only a stranger, Nessie, like all the rest who come and go." Thinking he was getting sleepy, Esther agreed.

"Of course, father. But mother will say we're talking too much. Lie still and rest while I make you some tea."

Esther's heart would have been still heavier than it was if she had seen the anguish in those blue eyes as they followed her to the door, seen the conclusive shudder of the thin shoulders as, like Hezekiah of old, her father turned his face to the wall.

The summer evening came in placid splendor, the north wind that all day had rioted in from the Gulf, crisp and pure, dying down and letting the warm, aromatic land scents steal out from river courses and upland meadows, from miles and miles of forested hills.

Esther's anticipation of the evening leisure, when she might sit on the veranda in the golden dusk and talk to

Noel in that pleasantly discursive fashion of comradeship formed on board the *Wenonah,* had been killed by what followed their meeting.

She knew that she would fear to let the sound of her cheerful voice or laugh reach her mother as she sat alone in their sitting-room, intent as usual on her sewing, knew that she could not put away the thought of her father, lying upstairs in bed.

With the oppression of the shadowed household heavy upon her, she wanted to get out somewhere alone, so, though rather tired from her tossing on the cramped deck of the ferry-boat, she made an unnecessary errand to the post-office, at the other end of the village street, and slipped down the meadow path while Noel was still lingering over his supper.

In the evening there was always a little group around the post-office, that center of country life, with its attraction of the latest telegraphic news and weather bulletin. As Esther came out past these groups, she saw Noel's angular figure strolling toward her up the plank sidewalk.

"The finger of destiny," he announced, falling into step beside her. "For the second time to-day, you play me the unhandsome trick of vanishing into space just when I was counting on your society, and lo, on my solitary prowl, you fall into my hands. Don't you think, now, the least you can do is to come along and show me some good perch for watching the sunset?"

Esther laughed. Once out of the home atmosphere her new desire for solitude left her, and she asked nothing better than to prolong her absence in Noel's society.

"Well, it's not far to the French Church," she acknowledged, "and that is always Virginia's and my favorite lookout place."

"The French Church be it then," he agreed, while Esther had a sudden shame-faced recollection that in these long summer twilights the wood-pile seat was apt to be the haunt of lover-like couples. How awkward she would feel should they stumble on one now.

Such was not their luck, however, and the flat bit of rough grass that stretched to the bluff edge, the wood-pile under the two tall firs, were in solitude.

"This is a lookout place worth having!" Noel decided after a comprehensive glance over the outspread glories of sea and hills. "And it was an artist who made the delightful irregularities of that wood-pile—here, let me fix those logs for you."

Esther settled herself on her sylvan throne with a little sigh of mingled repose and freedom.

"I'm tired," she said; "that ferry-boat deck isn't soft, and the craft doesn't run to benches."

"Why did you go?" he asked idly.

"Mother wanted some fresh butter from an old French woman over there who makes it extra good. We didn't churn much this week."

"You're a great housewife, aren't you?"

Esther laughed. She never felt any grievance over her household labors. The activity of her life was to her its saving grace.

"Needs must. I ought to be, after seventeen years of hotel life."

"Seventeen years?" he queried, careful not to reveal the knowledge acquired from Mrs. Tom.

"Yes, we came to Lanse Louise then, when I was five years old. My mother says it is all imagination, but I am sure I can remember things that happened before that: a big house, with women in pretty clothes, and music; there used always to be music. The queer thing

is," she went on, following the trail of vague memories in forgetfulness of her listener, "that I seem to have got my aunt and mother mixed up in my mind. There was a Mrs. Converse, who would take me on her knee and let me play with her chains and bracelets. I can see now the stones that I loved to make flash in her rings. She would sing to me and teach me little songs. I thought her voice was like the angels'. After we came here, I always wanted to talk about her as my mother, and insisted that my name was Esther Converse. Then, I saw that it made my mother cry, and she said my aunt was dead. I think that I must have lived with her once, but I never liked to ask my mother."

A log creaked under Noel's arm, and Esther looked around. He was sitting staring across the bay to the dusky Gaspé hills, above whose violet outline a faint glow told of the coming moon. He gave no sign that he had been listening, and all at once Esther's first sense of his vague aloofness, his impersonal attitude toward life, returned to her. Under it, she became conscious that she had been talking very fully of her family affairs to a stranger who could hardly be expected to take much interest in them—she, who from that realization of a darkened home which had grown with her growth, had always felt that her parents were to be mentioned as seldom as possible in the outside world.

"Oh, I beg your pardon for boring you with my nursery recollections. I don't know how I came to be so stupid," she protested, aglow with vexation.

He looked round at her and, under the deep kindliness of his gaze, a kindliness in which she almost fancied a mingled pity, her fears vanished.

"I like to hear you talk about anything, but most of all about yourself," he said simply.

Sudden tears dimmed Esther's eyes, an unusual manifestation for her, but the day's strain had told on her more than she guessed.

"Poor me! There's not much in my mild career to talk about." She laughed somewhat tremulously. Then, with fresh life in her voice:

"Oh, look!"

It was worth looking, for the moon's red disk was now peering above the hill's dark outline, and the surrounding sky was already aglow, while far across the still water ran the path of the Red Swan.

They sat in silence taking in at every sense the evening beauty, though perhaps to both the message of the night meant more than they could yet put into words.

"I shan't forget to-night in a hurry," Noel said, when at length Esther reluctantly made a move, and she forbore to ask his reason.

Homeward, down the straggling village street, the quiet houses on one side, the steep Bluff on the other, they went, talking now of the winter months when all the country-side made merry in sleigh drives or snowshoe tramps; of the isolation of early spring when the thaw came and sometimes even the mail could not get through for a fortnight.

"Father missed his paper so much," Esther was saying, "until I hit on a way of saving the *Montreal Star* for next winter. Then, if the mail didn't come, he could just read last year's one of the same date. It answered capitally."

"It must be a paper that is ahead of its time," Noel commented.

"I should think music would be a great resource at such times," he went on conversationally.

"It might be, yes," she acknowledged. "I play a good

deal on Virginia Holbeach's piano when I am up at the Bluff House. It was Miss Creighton who taught me most of what I know."

"But you have a piano in the hotel."

"Only in the public drawing-room."

"And don't you practice there?"

"Not often. Music seems to give my mother a headache. When the guests are playing I often see her looking miserable."

"That's strange. Doesn't she like music?"

"She knows all about it, but I've never seen her play. One winter I asked if I might have the piano moved into our sitting-room, but she said it would take up too much room."

On this Noel made no comment.

They had come to the brightly lit hotel door. At first Esther thought the veranda was deserted; then at the further end over in the corner where the moon made an angle of light she saw her mother leaning forward in a straight-backed armchair, while Dorval half sat, half leaned against the railing close by, looking down on her. The low murmur of her mother's voice, the intent poise of Dorval's figure, gave Esther a queer little momentary throb of misgiving, before the latter, hearing their footsteps, came forward with his usual greeting of every-day familiarity.

They sat down on some of the numerous chairs grouped about, but Esther and her mother were both very silent, while Dorval and Noel talked of local topics. Noel's rapid assimilation of facts in a new neighborhood generally kept one person busy supplying him with them.

Presently Mrs. Sabine went indoors and Esther followed her, but after Dorval had left, Noel sat smoking

one cigarette after another. There were many problems working in his mind, but his most coherent expression of them lay in the two disconnected phrases, "Esther Converse!" and "Through deep waters."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COUSINS

MARCUS HOLBEACH'S camp, Owl's Nest, was noted through all the region of fishing rivers for a solid, if simple, comfort, the result of long experience and no little expenditure. So, for the first few days Giles was pleasantly disappointed in camp life, finding everything on a more complete scale than he had ventured to hope. True, he did not like taking his morning bath in the river, and he was worked almost into a fever by the constant visitation of black-flies, against which all systems of window-screens and bed-curtains seemed powerless. Still, with beginner's luck, he managed almost at once to land a fair-sized salmon, and so felt that he might rest on his laurels. Then, too, his note-books were filling up with amazing local facts, for the men about the camp were quick to discover his main interest, and had set up a keen rivalry in supplying the most startling items.

This was well enough until the rain began, a whole week of cold rain and driving east winds, sufficient to dampen the spirits of the most inveterate sportsman.

On the fourth morning, with one eye swollen from a bite, and with a stiff leg from a fall over a twisted, dead stump, Giles was conscious of a distinct sense of martyrdom. Breakfast had suffered from a smoky fire, and his clothes felt clammy as he donned them. Marcus' invariable good spirits seemed the last straw. Brown and act-

ive, he actually looked as though ten years' burden of life had been lifted from his shoulders.

That morning, for the first time, Giles funked going out, making an excuse to sit by the fire and write up some notes, when the daily messenger from Lanse Louise came dripping in with the letters. Among these was one from a college friend of Giles, who, having married a wealthy American, was now being introduced to the delights of Newport. "I can hardly describe things better than by saying it's a sort of mixture of the best part of Cowes and Cannes," he wrote.

Now Cannes, with its many-raced aristocracy, came nearer to Giles' idea of Heaven than seas of glass and golden harps, and as he read the urgent invitation to come and share the joys of villa and yacht, his heart swelled with bitterness.

Most men would have considered the room where he sat as nearly perfect in its way, and for its purpose. One wide window opened onto a veranda with outlook across a steep gorge of the river, to a hillside varied by the tender tints of early summer greenery.

The hut itself, an up-to-date cross between bungalow and log cabin, stood in a scattered group of pine trees, and their perpetual murmur toned in with the river's deeper voice from the rapids below.

The room was paneled with varnished wood with a golden-brown surface that lighted responsive to fire-glow or sunshine.

On these walls were a varied medley of sporting sketches and amateur photographs, of moose and caribou horns, snow-shoes and guns. On the floor were dark bearskins, dun-gray moosehides, and strips of the bright-hued carpets woven in French farmhouses. Deep hammock-chairs afforded comfortable lounges, and magazines

and papers were scattered about in as great abundance as smoking materials—what could man want more for his few indoor hours, when below the door the river called with its good chances of a forty-pound salmon?

But Giles' mental vision was occupied with smooth, white yacht decks, Paris toilettes, fair faces, and world-known names.

"These Newport villas are as good as the best in Cannes," his friend wrote, and Giles knew what a Cannes villa could be.

Then a brilliant idea seized him. Fate might have bound him to marry Marcus' daughter, but surely he was not bound to be eaten alive by Marcus' black-flies and to break his legs over Marcus' tree-stumps. All Englishmen who came to Canada went to Niagara and New York. He would use this national obligation as his plea, making it understood that he would first inform Virginia of the good fortune in store for her.

If he were once engaged to the girl, her father would surely feel that he had done his duty and might be allowed some liberty. At her age, no one would expect an immediate marriage.

That evening after dinner he made his suggestion to Holbeach, and was relieved by the placid fashion of its reception.

True, there was just the slightest lifting of Marcus' eyebrows and the faint hint of a smile that made him feel like a school-boy detected in a weakness for too many jam tarts.

This was all very well, he decided, with a sense of injury, but Marcus himself had not always played the anchorite—witness Lady Warrenden more or less in the background.

"Yes, yes, my dear fellow. Make the most of your

time, by all means. It will be pleasanter traveling now than a month later when the heat comes and the hordes are let loose," was Marcus' response.

Thus simply was the matter settled, and it was only as Giles was ready to start that his cousin said casually:

"By-the-by, I hope you fully understand that whatever way you young folks may decide matters, you and I remain on the same good terms as before. Girls are fanciful, you know, and if it should happen that Virginia shirks the idea, we must make the best of things as they are."

"Oh, certainly, certainly!" Giles said confusedly, hardly for the moment understanding his cousin's meaning.

That Virginia should refuse to marry him seemed too remote a possibility for consideration.

While Marcus Holbeach stood in the driving mist by the landing-place watching Giles' head behind his heaped luggage in the canoe that was rapidly carrying him down-stream, a great sense of personal relief possessed him.

"Whichever way it works out, whether he becomes son-in-law or remains merely kinsman, I doubt if cousin Giles and I ever tempt Fate by another tête-à-tête week in a fishing-camp."

Thus he mused; then, aristocratic at heart as he was, he dismissed the matter with "And it all comes of poor Harold having married that vulgar woman!"

These same rainy days had been passed by Miss Creighton and Virginia in the busied serenity only possible to those who have no foe in their own household, no fear of outside intrusion.

Miss Creighton was the happy possessor of a hobby. For years her leisure had been given to the study of the native wild-flowers, and of late she had been putting her

knowledge into book form, specialized as "Canadian and Indian Folk-lore of Plants and Their Medicinal Uses."

"If it's ever published it will be more Mrs. LeRoy's work than mine," she would say apologetically. And indeed that lady's diffuse anecdotes had supplied her with rich material.

Virginia, too, had her indoor hobby in photography, and there was a completely fitted up room at the Bluff House for her work, while the price of materials and instruments was never considered in her orders to a Montreal shop.

From childhood it had come naturally to her wood-roving habits to bring home to Miss Creighton any rare or unusually fine blossom or plant, and just as naturally, as she grew skillful with her camera, she took to making picture records of many a perishable flower.

And so she came to have a hand in the work that was in preparation, and during these peaceful stormy days, though no storm kept her entirely indoors, she gave many hours to developing, or enlarging prints of the plants that Miss Creighton sat writing about.

On this placid state of affairs the news of Giles' imminent return fell as a disturbing force.

"Coming to-morrow afternoon," Virginia said in dismay to Miss Creighton. "Do you suppose he's ill?"

The little lady sat smoothing her pile of manuscript as tenderly as though about to be reft from it. With all her prim aloofness toward life, she had quick sympathetic intuitions, and, though no hint had been breathed to her, she had somehow guessed what was toward, and, knowing Virginia, scented strenuous times ahead.

Life had taught Miss Creighton a deep distrust of events, and her private idea of Paradise was a place where

nothing ever happened. She was careful to let slip no hint of her misgivings to her charge.

"Tom Rafuse would have told them in the kitchen if he were ill," she reassured her. "I fancy he must be going off on a trip somewhere. I never thought he seemed to take much interest in fishing," she added thoughtfully.

Virginia laughed.

"A blind mole could have seen that, Marraine." Then, more hopefully:

"Then you think that he'll only be here for the night?"

"And perhaps one day. You wouldn't mind that?"

"No," was the dubious retort. "And, anyway, he's sure to be poking round collecting his facts, as that old professor collected butterflies."

Armed with this hope, and fortified by a successful rainy morning's trout-fishing, Virginia condescended, the next afternoon, to do up her hair in its more elaborately mature fashion and to don a long house dress of white woolen stuff smartened by some lines of scarlet and gold Eastern embroidery.

Perhaps in this docility there was rather an expression of the chatelaine's pride in suitably welcoming even an undesired guest than any wish to deck herself for Giles' benefit, but Miss Creighton, looking on, sighed with a woman's wistfulness for the passing of the childhood over which she had watched.

Giles, coming in, chilled and cramped from canoe and buckboard, was cheerfully impressed by the home scene.

One of Miss Creighton's pleasant gifts was a talent for household decoration, and during her fifteen years' sojourn at Lanse Louise she had been gathering, here and there, from country auctions or from farmhouses beyond the reach of the omnivorous American collector, bits of

old china, quaint little mirrors, slim tables or secretaries, brought long ago from Jersey or France.

She had kept these things judiciously enough in the background to avoid the second-hand shop look which some women give their rooms. They merely served to blend with a long-established home air the comfortably cushioned modern sofas and chairs with their cheerful chintzes, and the rich-tinted Eastern rugs.

Save for the careful taste that had assorted them, there might have seemed too daring a combination of bright, light colors in the room, but its occupants had learned that a six months' white winter creates a craving for indoor brightness.

Another winter craving, the craving for sight and scent of growing things, was satisfied by the little conservatory opening off the room, and now aglow with blossoms too fragile for the sharp northern spring.

Such was the room that Giles entered, to find a bright wood fire on the hearth, and sitting before it, by a dainty tea-table, Virginia, in the dress that to his trained eyes bore the stamp of a French dressmaker.

"Heavens! She knows how to dress!" he decided with a new sense of satisfaction, as he marked the peculiar red enamel buckle and buttons and the coral-studded chain around her neck, that matched them and gave such a finish to it all.

If he had only known, it was Miss Creighton who, finding the whole set in a Montreal shop, had secured it for the adornment of her charge, who wore it with the cheerful indifference of one who had never expressed an ungratified wish.

As a rule, Virginia left the care of the tea-table, with other such responsibilities to her governess, but half an hour earlier that lady had said:

"Suppose you pour out tea to-day. I want to go on with my lace-work, and you know you are never doing anything."

"All right," Virginia agreed, her mood still bent on fulfilling her duty by her guest.

"Really, this looks quite like home!" he said, stretching himself in his armchair, and beaming over his teacup and buttered toast.

"Well, it *is* home," Virginia responded literally. Then, with a little flash of eagerness: "But didn't you *love* Owl's Nest?"

The up-river camp was with her a sort of religion, and she needs must respect any one privileged to tarry there.

"Oh, yes, certainly. A most interesting place. But haven't you sometimes found the noise of the river a bit monotonous? It and the pine trees make a rather melancholy chorus," he ventured.

"That's what I like best," she retorted, her amiability waning before such heresy. Then, with an effort at good manners: "But you got two fish, didn't you?"

"So you heard of that? Yes, they were salmon, you know," he informed her politely.

"Well, I didn't suppose they were herring," she said. Then, meeting Miss Creighton's alarmed glance, she hastened to offer Giles hot rolls and cake.

Miss Creighton and her French cook had arranged a little dinner that would have softened the heart of a woman-hater, and Giles did not feel at all like a woman-hater that evening as he sat at the pretty table with its red-shaded lights and heard the wind howling in from the Gulf and up the forest gorges.

He was still young enough to prefer the more highly flavored charms of the matron in the thirties to what he had always mentally dubbed "school-girls," but to-night,

whether his Tomlinsonian nature expanded in the atmosphere of household comfort, or whether it was given him to catch a fleeting hint of the graciousness, the rare combination of gentleness and force of budding womanhood, it began to seem to him eminently desirable that this girl should become his wife. Perhaps the slight doubt cast by Marcus upon its realization made the project more attractive to him. However it was, he certainly exerted himself to please both women, and Virginia decided that Giles wasn't so hard to talk to after all, while Miss Creighton, looking on, speculated on what would be the outcome, and if it were possible that Virginia's amiability had a deeper root than a girlish pride in playing the hostess.

All three had rather wondered how they were going to get through the evening, and Giles had even thought of an early retreat to his cousin's smoking room on the plea of letter-writing.

But Virginia's ready, "Oh, do smoke. You know father always smokes everywhere!" disarmed him.

Then he was lucky in beginning to ask questions as to his projected tour, for Virginia felt a bit of malicious pleasure in showing him that, although she could not respond to his talk of England, yet she was not altogether untraveled and could sketch him out a good itinerary from Quebec to Montreal and Toronto and on to Niagara and New York.

It was rather fun to lay down the law to Giles as to what he ought to do, and maps were got out and the two heads bent close together over them in a cousinly fashion that would have amazed her father could he have seen it.

It was at this juncture that Miss Creighton yielded to temptation and quitted her post. A girl who was trying to prepare herself for a place in a cousin's shop in Que-

bec had left school hopelessly behindhand in arithmetic, and Miss Creighton, always ready to help a lame dog over a stile, had offered her aid in the evenings.

The girl was waiting in the morning-room, and the kind little woman, hating to disappoint her and thinking she was not needed, slipped away.

But Virginia saw her go and, knowing that she would not reappear for an hour or more, felt abandoned. Her cheerful eagerness left her, giving place to her former brusque aloofness. Giles, on the contrary, considered that Miss Creighton must be acting on a hint from Holbeach to give him his chance, and his spirit rose to achievement. Seeming to lose interest, Virginia pushed aside the atlas and leaned back in her chair.

"Will you come back here to join father?" she asked, a bit drearily. She was rapidly tiring of her guest, and felt sleepy after a morning's fishing.

"Only in a certain case," said Giles, with an air of mystery and a meaning glance into her face. The simplicity of her apparent desire for his return touched his vanity.

Some instinct made Virginia uneasy, and as Giles leaned forward she shoved her chair a bit back. As he paused expectantly, she seemed to have no choice but to ask:

"What would that be?"

"Only if I am allowed to come and take you back to England with me," he said, with a fair amount of tenderness. He was really finding this love-making come more naturally than he had expected.

Virginia's heart gave a wild leap, and with a startled glance she measured the distance between herself and the door. At first she could only think how dreadful it would be if her cousin had suddenly gone off his head, then all

the vague distrust with which she had first heard of this visit crystalized into form and she was ready to stand on the defensive of her heart's desires as a mother bird guards her nest.

Jack's words came to her mind: "I wonder if your father will want to take you back to England?"

She had little guessed how much worse it was, and that her father, still not wishing to be bothered with her, had planned to hand her over to the first person willing to take her, to the man he himself despised. So she said to herself in new bitterness of soul. Hitherto hers had been, even while she was set apart from the sweetness of home ties, a wistfully friendly outlook toward the world; now her soul armed itself for the fray through which she began to realize that she could alone win her happiness.

Of course, she was unjust to her father, but, when the generations clash, youth in its ignorant egotism generally is horribly unjust to its elders, as perchance it comes to realize years later in deep repentance.

Giles, watching her with a gloating eye on her good points, saw the new glow of pride and purpose in her face, and took it for delight in such an unexpected prospect.

How absurd in Marcus, he thought, to attempt to enhance her value by pretense of uncertainty, when the girl was ready to drop into his grasp like a ripe plum. An amused smile dawned on his face and he would have taken her hand in his, but that was not practicable when she held both hands so tightly together in a nervous clasp.

"But if I wanted to go to England, my father would take me himself," she made brave protest, with fluttering color, ignoring what lay behind the words.

The smile she hated, broadened, as though the idea were amusing, and his words were distinctly patronizing.

"*Would* he? Well, however that may be, I think you might find it pleasanter to be taken there as my wife, and be welcomed to Holbeach Manor by the village people with arches and flags and the children courtesying in rows."

Now Virginia knew little of Holbeach Manor beyond the fact that her father's paper was stamped with its address and that when he was in England she wrote to him there. Still, ignorant as she was of what the ownership of such an English place implied, she instinctively felt that Giles had no right to be thus offering her the entrance into her father's home.

"But Holbeach Manor is my father's, not yours," she asserted.

The words irritated Giles, and there was an unmanly note of triumph in his voice as he answered:

"Yes, but some day if I live it must be mine, and if you choose, mine to share with you. In the meantime, your father would like us to live there with him."

So it was true then! This was her father's doing! Poor Virginia might not guess at the remorseful care that prompted the wish, could only resent what seemed to her so wanton a tampering with the order of her life.

"Then it is my father who wants this?"

Even Giles' undiscerning spirit could not fail to note the desolate echo in her voice, but it was not for him to be moved by it.

What did the girl mean by her stupid irresponsiveness? After all, she must be less quick-witted than he had supposed. So there was a tolerant superiority in his answer.

"It stands to reason he would like a marriage that would give you the family name and home."

This was not said with any malicious intent, but merely to make her understand her privileges. Far as she was from guessing at the real situation, something in Giles' tone that, for all her inexperience, seemed to her so unlike that in which a man woos a girl to be his wife, awoke a new pride in Virginia, a pride all the stronger for its undercurrent of distrust.

Give, not keep, the family name, he had said, and to that she made answer:

"But I have those now."

Even as she spoke, she remembered that for some unknown reason this English home had never been hers, and her cousin's smile emphasized the fact. Giles was rapidly waxing spiteful, for though it is a habit to limit such a quality to women, yet it is nearly as often found among men, and is then all the more baneful for its virile power. Perhaps this spitefulness was enhanced by his doubts as to the innocence with which Virginia asserted her claims. Surely, for all the careful remoteness of her upbringing, the girl must by this time have some idea of the true state of affairs. Common sense must tell her that there was some reason why she had never shared her father's home. It never entered his head that to Virginia, Lanse Louise and the Bluff House represented the family home, and that she had hitherto looked on her father's absences as exiles in the cause of business. With Jack LeRoy and Esther Sabine she had always taken it for granted that her father, like Mr. Dorval and the Tathems, had some big business, either fish or lumber, which kept him so much in England. Lanse Louise had small idea of the varied round that makes the year to those who toil not neither do they spin. Even the

great railway king, whose yacht called in every year on its way to and from his North Shore river, was known to be a strenuous worker.

"In a measure," Giles loftily allowed. "Virginia Holbeach is, no doubt, a name of long usage in our family. But you would find it all very different, once you were my wife. Then you could really share your father's life, get to know his friends and help him entertain them."

Virginia's disquietude was growing, but she would not show it.

"But I could now if he wished it," she asserted, a little tremor in the words.

Giles warmed to the fray. If she didn't understand what an honor he was doing her, she must be made to.

"You could hardly do so in England, and as your father gets older he is not likely to come across here every year. He was not out last year, you know."

Her eyes widened, while dark circles showed around them.

Giles went on more persuasively:

"Believe me, you can form no idea of the brilliancy of the life I offer you. You would be presented at court on your marriage, and as my wife would wear the family jewels. Your father would doubtless have them reset for you."

"If my father has any jewelry put away he will be sure to give it to me soon, now that I'm grown up. What else would he do with it?" Virginia announced, with a certainty, amounting to contempt for anyone who could suppose otherwise. Here at least was sure ground.

"He cannot give you the family jewels unless you are my wife," Giles said sharply.

"Why not?"

One would have thought Virginia's whole soul was

intent on jewelry from the low-breathed intensity of the question, but in reality, it was that she instinctively guessed what their possession stood for.

"Because the jewels go to the heir's wife, because you—" he hesitated and added lamely: "You have never been known at home as his daughter."

"But if we were married, and lived with him, everyone must know that I am his daughter."

Virginia had grown paler and paler and Giles shrank before the insistent question of her eyes. He began to wish himself well out of the business. He had from the first decided that she must be made to understand she could not be acknowledged as Marcus' daughter, but it did not seem so easy a feat as he had supposed. However, he did his best.

"Not necessarily so. You might call him uncle if you liked. He has always seemed more like an uncle than a cousin to me. It would be enough to say that you were a Canadian. Canadians are rather the fashion now in political circles."

He was talking on, trying to get safely over the thin ice, when Virginia broke in, standing before him now like an accusing spirit.

"You mean that he would be ashamed of me?"

The words were vibrant with pain, her head was poised backwards. Giles had never realized that she could look so positively beautiful.

"No, no," he said quickly. "Don't you see that he wants you to have your share of everything?"

"If he does, he can give it to me himself." Her voice trembled a bit on the words.

"No, he cannot. Haven't I told you, my dear girl, that the place comes to me?" Giles answered more sharply.

Then Virginia let her passion loose:

"And why should I care for a place, for people I have never seen? What if I don't want your jewels or your arches and flags? This is my home, here, and these people are the only friends I have ever known. *They* will never be ashamed of me."

So this quiet school-girl had a temper behind her Sainte Nitouche aspect. This was a little too much of a good thing, Giles decided. Still, with a home at Holbeach Manor and a seat in Parliament in prospect, he persevered, though with an air of wounded feeling.

"I must say this is a strange way to take my offer of the best I have. Surely, you must see that in making it I can only wish your happiness."

Virginia's fine nature was quick to feel the reproach and she scanned him doubtfully. Then, her instinct warned her that the words did not ring true, that they were not the expression of his real feeling. But true or not, anything Giles felt or said was of small moment to her beside this new and startling fact: there was some reason for her never having been acknowledged in England as her father's daughter.

"But you would not want anyone to know who I really am?" she asked, clinging to her point.

Giles' attempted suavity was gone from his voice, which had a snappy sound in it.

"No, that I should have to ask you to promise," he said firmly.

"Why?"

Giles was not as thick-skinned as he thought himself, and before that direct question, put with the concentrated force of deadly fear by the girl who seemed all at once to be set in an atmosphere of solitude, herself against the world, he wavered in mute embarrassment.

As they faced each other, his silence gave Virginia her answer. Slowly, a deep crimson tide spread from her neck to her forehead, but her head never drooped, her eyes still fronted him gallantly. She had understood at last. For all the careful seclusion of her life, she had read novels, and heard school-girls talk, and now, in a moment, every scattered fact pieced itself in a new mosaic, the dark mosaic of an overshadowed birth. As yet, the grief and bitterness were hardly realized. All she was fully conscious of, was her scornful wrath against the man, the kinsman who could, for his own ends, thus humiliate her.

After one little choking gasp, she spoke, her words coming in a clear undertone:

"It does not matter to me at all what you ask or what you want. It only matters that you shall go away, and that I should never see you again. You are leaving in the mail-boat, aren't you? Well, she sails at ten tomorrow morning, and I shall keep out of the way until you are gone. That is all."

She was turning away, in complete finality, when Giles, now thoroughly alarmed for himself, broke out:

"I swear, I had no thought of hurting you in any way. How was I to guess that you had no idea of the true state of affairs? You surely cannot wish to ruin me by making trouble between your father and myself?"

Her utter contempt gave Virginia self-control. She turned, her hand on the door, and studied him with a sort of curiosity, as though gazing at a new species of human being.

"You think I would speak to my father of what has happened? If *you* are an English gentleman, I am glad my only friends are common Canadians. You can tell my father your own story. I shall say nothing."

The words were so quietly spoken that Giles, intent on his own interests, hardly felt their sting until later when memory reproduced them.

"But if he questions you?" he said eagerly.

"I doubt if he does," and now came a smile that did not suit those young lips. "If he should," she went on, "I shall only tell him that I don't like you, and never could, which I'm sure is true enough. I'll go now, please. Miss Creighton will see you have everything you want."

Without another word or look she was actually gone and Giles was left planted there, furious and sheepish, feeling that he had somehow made a great mess of things, and realizing that, after all, Virginia Holbeach would develop into a wife of whom any man might be proud.

CHAPTER XIX

A COMFORTER

WHEN Virginia fled from her interview with Giles, carrying off the verbal honors of war, she hurried out by a side door into the cooling shadow of the night.

The storm had cleared and the wind, veering into the northwest, was driving great black masses of cloud-wrack across rain-swept, star-studded, purple spaces. From the wet garden came up the heavy scent of hardy roses, and long yellow rays from the lighted windows showed the drooping pink and white blossoms.

The girl stood with parted lips, her hands clasped on her breast to still its rise and fall.

It was the first time in her carefully sheltered life that she had ever interchanged an angry word, and her whole being was in tumult.

But beneath the physical tumult was the chill consciousness of the fact that shattered all the dear homely aspect of her world. And the strangest thing about this fact was its sudden familiarity. She knew now that she had always felt that she and her father did not stand in quite normal relations to each other. Until this summer she had only seen him from a childish standpoint, but it was inevitable that of late she should have come under the influence of the charm that Marcus could always at will exert over women.

And perhaps it was the sense of this charm which had caused the bitterness of her cry to Jack: "Father! What do I matter to him!"

She could not but have come to feel a pride in belonging to him, and now it seemed in some way she hardly understood she did not belong in the same fashion as she had thought. Giles had certainly made that much plain to her.

It was lucky for her tonight that she was saved from that solitary bitterness that oftener than we think leaves enduring marks on young lives, by recently-heard words treasured warm at her heart.

Jack was away in the outside world, but she still heard him asking if she could some day go away alone with him to face the hardships of the woods. Oh, if only she might go now, at once, without having to meet her father again, with that strange new thing between them!

There had been no word of writing between her and Jack, and she somehow knew that he felt he had no right to that at present. But now she meant to write and to get her letter to him even if she had to ask Mr. Dorval to forward it. Mr. Dorval! The name brought a new thought, and with the thought a hot flush. Did he know? And Miss Creighton? . . . Perhaps they all knew.

Well, none of them should speak of it to her, or guess what Giles had revealed to her.

Years of childish self-repression came to her help now. Other girls, used to a feminine atmosphere of expansiveness, might have been crying on their beds. Her first instinct was to get her letter to Jack written at once.

Once in her own room Virginia went direct to her writing-table and poured out the ready words. There were no reticences needed here. Jack and she belonged to each other in the world-old fashion.

Thus she wrote:

Oh, Jack, I understand now the reason why father never had me with him but left me out here alone when he went back to his English home. I wonder if they all know it, if you understood it before I did? But that doesn't matter, for, anyway, you won't despise me, even if the others do. I found it out to-night from dear Cousin Giles, who, it seems, was fetched out to marry me because I couldn't go to father's home except as Giles's wife; at least, that's what he said. As if I wanted to go! As if I wanted anything but to go away with you—just we two by ourselves. . . . Oh, Jack, come soon and take me! No, I didn't mean to worry you. You mustn't think I won't be brave and wait till the time comes. Only remember—I'm glad to think of giving up all the things I've had here, and I'll be glad to live in a rough hut and to cook and wash for you. I'll learn how, never fear. Don't think I'm unhappy, for I can't be unhappy when I've got you, and I have, haven't I, Jack?

Always yours,
VIRGINIA.

The next morning while Giles was loitering over the comforts of a solitary breakfast, a bit uncomfortable as to the ultimate result to himself of Virginia's wrath, but for the present thankful to get away at any price, Virginia was slipping down the wood-path to the shore.

The sky was cloudless after the storm, and from the soaked woods went up a hundred aromatic scents in the sunshine.

"The summer's almost gone," the girl noted idly as she saw the coral-red clusters that had replaced the ivory white of the dwarf cornel blossoms.

That short northern summer had given and taken much, and for all she looked the same slim girlish creature in her red jersey and short skirt, she would never be quite the same again. Life would bring her

better things, fuller developments and powers, but the first rosy flush had faded into broad daylight.

The Basin still lay unrippled by a sea breeze, and a rising tide swept the canoe across to the opposite shore with little effort on her part. She was on her way to the pink cottage.

Early as it was, Mrs. LeRoy was in her garden, busy picking the raspberries she made into the jam that, as she had told Jack, was a part of her little income. Summer visitors who had once tasted it always wanted some jars to take back to Montreal or Quebec.

The dark blue cotton dress was tucked up from the dewy grass, and a well-worn tweed cap of Jack's rested on the back of her head.

She came down the path, basket on arm, Czar close at her heels, and paused in a sunny angle of the house to gaze fondly on three tomato plants. Grown in an old tin in the kitchen window, set out with loving precautions against late frosts, they had so far survived.

But on the Gulf shores, July is the only month without a frost and with August peril would come upon them.

Like Mr. Sabine, Mrs. LeRoy had a passion for sailing close to the wind with nature, and the fact that she had once succeeded in growing a handful of green tomatoes, afterwards ripened in the kitchen window, was a life-long triumph.

"If they ain't in blossom," she murmured proudly, "I must look out an' keep that sacking handy to cover them the first chilly nights. It does seem as though the Lord might have added a bit on to our summer at both ends without its hurting anyone, but I guess He knows. The land's sakes! If it ain't you!" she broke out, as Virginia's red figure appeared between the spruce trees, and the dog ran to meet her.

"Yes, it's me," was the obvious answer.

"What are you doing out this time of day? Had your breakfast?"

"Yes—at least a cup of tea in my room. You know I'm often out quite early."

" 'Tain't good for you. You might get consumption comin' out in the mornin' air on an empty stomach."

Virginia laughed and some new note in the sound caused the wise old eyes that had shed such bitter tears in their day for their own and others' sorrows to peer at her shrewdly.

"Set right down here on the steps an' I'll fetch you some of my raspberries an' cream presently," said Mrs. LeRoy, lowering her heavy bulk with a camel-like folding-up process to the seat beside her.

"The tomatoes is in flower," she began as a conversational opening.

"You don't say so!" said the girl somewhat listlessly. She knew the importance of the event, but she was wondering how to open the question of Jack's letter.

Something in Virginia's drooping attitude decided Mrs. LeRoy on a front attack.

Laying her big work-worn hand on the slim brown one, she asked gently: "Why, what's the matter with the child? You ain't frettin', are you?"

The hand under her own trembled, but Virginia's voice was clear. "I don't need to fret when I've got Jack," she said softly.

"Got Jack?"

There was a certain dismay in the words, as though events were marching a bit too fast for the speaker.

Across the set strain of the girl's face there flickered the light of a happy memory.

"Yes, he told me that, you know, the morning the boat was late, and he came down to our landing."

"Well, if he don't beat anything!" was the irrepressibly proud comment, before a sense of decorum prevailing, and quite forgetful of the fact that she had spurred him on, Jack's mother protested: "All the same, he hadn't no right to be sayin' them things to you, sore as he must ha' been tempted, while he's doin' your father's work an' takin' his money."

The sound of her father's name, together with the implied blame to Jack, roused Virginia.

"Yes, Jack *had* a right to," she hesitated, and one of her rare blushes rose, "for it was my fault. I—I ran down to meet him."

A reminiscent chuckle told that her listener was recalling the days when she too was young.

"And there 're other things that matter more than any money, and—I've no one but Jack now!"

The pained echo in the words told the whole story to the hearer who already knew so much. A pallor crept over the leathery texture of the old woman's skin, and she paused a moment before she murmured:

"For sure he never went an' told you! Well, I just wish I had bitten that stupid old tongue of mine out, afore——"

A note of triumph broke in on her words.

"Then *you* knew, and *he* knew and he cares for me all the same! Then nothing else matters. Some day he'll take me away from them all."

Mrs. LeRoy shook her head, and her words came, slow and weighty. She wanted so desperately to help the girl, both for Jack's sake and her own.

"See here, child," she began. "This being the first time as you've rubbed up against the dark things of the

world, 'tain't to be wondered at that you take it hard, but, whatever you do, don't you go making things out worse than they are. That's a trick we mostly have when we're young, an' sorry enough we're apt to be for it afterwards, when real heart-breaks, as you've got to set your teeth to, come along. Look you, mind you now, there ain't no shame to you in this, an' don't you fancy there is. As for your pa, if I could tell you half what he did for Jack's father in his worst days when other friends fell off like maple-leaves after a frost, you'd know how full of goodness his heart is. Yes, goodness," she repeated firmly, as a little protesting sound came from Virginia. "And while you don't know how things came about, you ain't got no right to judge him, an' if you do, for sure there'll come a day you'll be sorry for it. I don't know the story myself an' don't want to, but if you've been thinking of your poor young mother an' of her being wronged—" Virginia started convulsively, but the kind grasp held her hand fast,—"well, I'd be willin' to take me Bible oath as Marcus Holbeach never bruck a woman's heart since he was born. See here now—" and the deep voice softened to persuasiveness—"I'm Jack's mother, an' I know you've got a sort of liking for me, uneducated old thing as I am . . ."

"Oh, *dear* Mrs. LeRoy!"

"Yes, child, I know you think a lot more of me than you need to. Well, then, I want you to promise me as you won't go doing nothing to hurt your father's feelings, for remember, old folks has feelings just as well as young ones, an' more so, perhaps. You've got a kind of look in your eye I don't trust, like a pup when he's meanin' to go off rabbit-huntin' on the sly."

Virginia had to laugh, though the tears were near, too.

The big heart was exerting its humanizing influence on her, and she could not but respond to its demand.

"What do you think I would do?" she demanded. "I'm not going to run away if that's what you're afraid of. All the same, I *might,* if I hadn't Jack to wait for," she added with a pretty touch of defiance.

But Mrs. LeRoy was unsatisfied.

"Well, what is it you want? For sure you're wanting something."

Then it came out. "I want to send a letter to Jack and he forgot to tell me where to write."

"He didn't tell you 'cause he knew it wouldn't be playing fair to be writing to you yet awhile."

The mother was taking part against her own desires, for her son, and her words failed to carry conviction.

"But I must send a letter now," Virginia asserted.

"To ask him to come back?"

"No."

"Just to tell him how miserable you're feeling?"

"Not exactly." She could not quite deny the accusation.

"Well, see here now. You was always a plucky child, never cryin' out when you hurt yourself, an' you'll be pluckier than ever if you keep quiet now and let Jack put all his heart into the work as he's tryin' to do for you, without thinkin' you're frettin' here. What's the good of telling things, anyway? If you let 'em alone they mostly tell themselves in their own way. Come now, you've lots of sense, and you see what I mean, don't you, child?"

"Yes."

"And you won't try to send that letter?"

"No. You're right. It was selfish and stupid in me."

And then Virginia broke down and cried out her sor-

rows on Mrs. LeRoy's feather-bed bosom, and was soothed and petted with maternal wiles, and finally coaxed into eating some of the raspberries and cream which the good woman felt ought to be good for any trouble.

CHAPTER XX

MIDSUMMER

THE brief northern summer with all its concentrated glamour lay over Lanse Louise. Above the western hills the afterglow lingered late into the night, and pleasure-seekers drifted about the Basin, or picnicked on the sandy beaches of the Barrachois, regardless of the passing hours, while some inland folk, who joyed in starting out with the boats at daylight to the codfish grounds, appeared never to go to bed at all.

The barefoot brown children from the Indian camp went from house to house with baskets of wild strawberries in satiny nests of birch-bark.

The water was warm enough for bathing, and the hotel verandas and windows at all times of the day were decked with wet garments.

To everyone in the hotel it was the busiest season of the year, for the *Chateauguay's* last downward trip had filled the house to overflowing. From the crowded dining-room tables might be heard the chatter of two tongues, the shriller French prevailing. As usual, the two nationalities kept to themselves, a large French family group, with a name historic in Canada's annals, occupying the cottage behind the house, trooping down in a body to daily mass in the French Church before the English folk were out of bed. Esther expected that, as usual at this season, her leisure time would be curtailed,

that her morning tasks would be prolonged, the outdoor commissions for her mother more frequent. She had not expected, though, that the whole weight of active household superintendence would fall upon her through her mother spraining her ankle.

It was a queer accident. No one heard Mrs. Sabine fall while carrying a tray of glass downstairs. Esther coming in from the garden saw the broken glass at the foot of the stairs, and exploring, found her mother on the sitting-room sofa with a bandaged ankle, which she said hurt her to put to the ground.

Esther wanted to send after the old doctor, but Mrs. Sabine remembered that he had that morning been fetched by some fishermen over to Grand Grêve, and was not likely to be back before the next day. So it ended in his not seeing the ankle at all, though it was a fortnight before Mrs. Sabine made an effort to resume her usual activity. In the meantime, Esther took her place, seeing the midsummer days go without any of that outdoor life which compensates to northern folk for the long winter months. She took it with her usual good-natured philosophy, though it was trying when Noel asked her to sail with him across the Bay on an all-day fossil-hunting expedition, to have to refuse and go back to sorting linen and giving out stores.

It almost seemed to her once or twice that her mother invented things for her to do, so often was her late afternoon leisure disturbed, and these claims on her time never came so frequently as when Noel, having returned from an early outing, was lounging on the veranda ready, she knew, to intercept her when she appeared.

She submitted to every demand, but grew crafty in saving her evenings by slipping off while supper was going on. Sometimes she would go to the Bluff House

and beguile Virginia out in the boat, sometimes have a musical evening with Miss Creighton.

Esther wondered if it were the fault of her own mood that even this peaceful refuge seemed to have lost some of its habitual serenity.

Miss Creighton's wistful face had the worn, haggard look caused by wakeful nights, and she watched Virginia nervously, while the latter either kept a brooding silence, or chattered in a restless fashion equally unlike her.

When Noel was not off on a two or three days' trip, he generally managed to join Esther some time during the evening, either appearing on the Bluff House veranda in his casual fashion, or else meeting her somewhere on the road.

Was it any wonder that on such nights when even the old sighed for their lost youth, and when, in the balmy dusk, earth whispered her heart-secret to man and maid, the return to the hotel should be late, though hardly ever so late that there was not some couple tarrying in a corner of the veranda?

Firm friends, if nothing more, had Noel and she become, and Esther's receptive mind was rapidly assimilating new outlooks on life.

She had been so starved for knowledge of the great outside world, of which she longed to feel herself a part, had so wearied of the unaccountable gloom that enshrouded her home.

If she had allowed herself to realize it, she would have felt this gloom to be gathering thicker than ever, but in summer at least she could escape from it, she said to herself, and she would.

She was grateful to Noel for not noticing the change in her father's manner toward him. From the day of

Noel's arrival and of Mr. Sabine's heart attack, the latter had ceased to show any of his old interest in fossils. If Noel sought him on the veranda or in the office to display a new specimen, he was nervously polite, but invariably made an excuse to slip off as soon as possible to stable or garden, so that Noel, seeing his distress and never being invited into the sanctum of the family sitting-room, ceased to make overtures.

It was the end of a still, gray afternoon, warm with the languor of coming rain, when Esther, freed for the time from household tasks, had wandered up into the sloping fields behind the house, to gather strawberries for her father's supper. The snake-fences of the pasture sheltered in their angles the wild woodland growth, and here, on the edge of the grasses, the little red berries showed abundant. After half filling her basket, Esther nestled herself in a corner of the fence, and gave herself up to a contented laziness. There before her lay all her little world outspread as on a map. At one end, half hidden by the curve of the wooded hill, the Bluff House and the French Church, then the thicker cluster of houses around the post-office, then came Dorval's trim house and fields adjoining their own, and beyond that a few cottages straggled to the white English Church, while further up the valley lay fields, a few scattered houses and the little group of Indian shanties on the river bank. Across the Basin that pink cottage in the hollow by the brook was the home of Mrs. LeRoy and Jack.

As she looked down on the familiar land-marks, her mind disconnectedly followed the various trains of thought they suggested. She idly pondered over the mysteriously sudden fashion in which Jack LeRoy had again taken himself off. Could that be the reason of

Virginia's changed manner and Miss Creighton's worried air?

Mr. Dorval, she was sure, knew the secret of why and where he had gone, though he had only laughed provokingly and talked about Jack the Giant Killer, when she questioned him.

Perhaps he might have told her, if her mother, hearing that laugh, had not limped out on the veranda and joined the group.

"She never seems to like my talking to Mr. Dorval. It's always as though she were afraid of what I would say," she pondered. Then: "And it's even worse with Mr. Noel—goodness knows why. I must talk to somebody."

She heard the sound of soft French voices as two girls from the kitchen came up the meadow path with milking pails, followed shortly by Alphonse with a yoke on his shoulders for the bearing home of the milk.

It was later than she had thought, and she must be getting back to the house. She reached out for her basket, but checked herself to watch a long, slouching figure in well-worn blue serge that appeared around the barn coming up the hill path. It was Noel, whom she had supposed far afield in some of his happy hunting-grounds. A thrill of nervous pleasure came over her as she wondered how he had tracked her.

"Where are you off to now?" she greeted him.

"No further than here. I came to look for you," he said, stretching his length on the grass beside her with an air of achievement.

"Who told you I was here?"

"No one. My window looks uphill, you know, and while dressing I caught sight of a blue speck I thought was you."

"Well, never call yourself near-sighted again."

"There are such things as spectacles," he remarked placidly.

"But I thought you were off for all day in Pierre Tessier's whaler."

"So I thought I was going to be. But as I went down to the wharf this morning—I saw you in the dairy but you wouldn't look at me—I met Tom Tathem and Mr. Holbeach going for a bath. It seems they all came down last night to the Bluff House. I spent the day with them on Holbeach's yacht. It's likely to be my last sail."

"Your last sail?" Esther repeated rather helplessly, ignoring the rest of his news. She felt that Noel was staring at her in a queer fashion, and sat very still, looking down on the little world that had a less cheerful air than a few moments ago.

It was the old thing, others went and left her here, and that little world closed in around her with prison walls.

"Yes. Tom and his wife are leaving in to-morrow's mail-boat and I am going with them."

How stupid in him to watch her so closely. Surely, he could not think that she cared. With an effort she pulled herself together, shoving aside the blank feeling until later.

"Why, what a lot you will have to do! There will be all your fossils to pack!" she said briskly. A sudden bit of pride prevented her showing any more interest in his doings.

"Perhaps I shall leave them here until I come back. You wouldn't mind seeing that they weren't thrown away, would you?" he asked.

"Oh, of course not," she said, making a little move-

ment to rise. She thought this talk of a return was only a way of slurring over his farewell, and it irritated her.

"Please give me a little more time," he pleaded. "It seems to me that you're always in a hurry nowadays. You haven't even asked where I'm going."

All at once Esther felt very sorry for herself.

"Why should I?" she said with a touch of bitterness. "You forget that I'm so used to people coming and going. They keep on saying what an Arcadia it is and how they could be content here forever. But all the same, they go back to the big world, and I—I stay here."

"You won't always," he asserted with a security that she took for carelessness, and braced herself against further weakness of self-revelation.

"Well," he went on, "since you won't condescend to ask, I'll tell you that Jack LeRoy and I are going forth into the wilderness in search of untold gold and silver. You mustn't ask me any more, please; it's all a secret, only I didn't care to go without telling you what I was about."

The emphasis on the "you" changed Esther's outlook again. From the spruce trees behind her, a robin poured out his evening hymn and her heart sang with him.

"Oh, then that's why Jack LeRoy vanished into space, and Mr. Dorval would only laugh when I asked where he was," she commented sagely.

"Yes, Dorval has a finger in the pie with the Tathems and Mr. Holbeach, but you mustn't let him know that I told you anything about it. He seems to be a great friend of yours," he added, with a curious glance at her.

Feeling the meaning of tone and glance, she answered lightly:

"Yes, but he's not my private property! He plays

chess with father on winter evenings, and sometimes he takes my mother for a sleigh drive, and sometimes me for a sail, while he's in and out every day. We all miss him when he goes away."

It would almost have seemed natural for Noel to ask:

"Will you miss me?" and perhaps he was going to when the half-hour before supper bell clanged out, causing a diversion.

"Gracious! There's the first bell, and I haven't given out the fruit," Esther cried, jumping up.

But Noel stood in the path before her, making no sign of moving. "See here," he said, "I'm charged by Miss Holbeach to bring you down to the Bluff House to-night after supper. The Tathems are all there and Hugh wants them to have a farewell beach fire. You'll come, won't you?"

Why did he peer down at her so intently? Esther felt her heart beat faster as she answered, "Yes, I'll come."

"You won't fail me? Remember, I count on you."

"Yes," was all she said, but she had read the meaning in his eyes and knew that henceforth they belonged to each other.

Side by side, they strolled down the meadow path, Esther, at least, wondering when they would walk together again.

As they rounded the barn and came to Mr. Sabine's beloved plot of flower-beds, they found that worthy hovering over his treasures in a fluttering state of distress.

The sight of the couple apparently diverted his mind, and he stared at Noel in the anxious distrust which seemed to grow upon him whenever the latter appeared.

"Why, daddy, what's the matter?" Esther demanded, seeing that havoc had been wrought.

"Matter! Those hens of your mother's again! What

chance can my poor annuals have! And the carnations were doing so well!"

They were a tragic sight now, drooping in the midst of that dusty turmoil which appears to be the henly idea of happiness.

"Never mind, dad. I'll help you water and put them in again, as soon as tea's over," Esther said with an inward pang, at thought of her imperiled evening leisure.

"And I'll help," Noel said valorously.

Esther laughed. "What do you know about gardening?" she asked.

"Not much, I allow," he acknowledged.

"I think it would be better for only you and me to touch them, Esther," her father protested jealously.

"Very well, dad."

"Remember my orders from Miss Holbeach to bring you there this evening," Noel said, still lingering.

Esther cast an anxious eye over the extent of damaged beds. The hens must have executed a regular war-dance across them. There was an hour's work there before her.

She did not mean to fail in her promise to Noel, but she was still wearing the crumpled cotton of her day's labors, and it would be hard work to get through in time to dress and go.

"The plants must all be set out to-night or they'll die," Mr. Sabine quavered.

"All right, dad. We'll do them," she responded bravely.

"If it rains soon, they won't suffer so much," her father said with a glance skyward.

Rain would throw fresh obstacles in her way, but she would not consider that possibility. Resolutely she set about her tasks, scarcely taking time for a cup of tea.

It was little use trying to hurry over the carnations with her father pottering lovingly at each plant, and Noel's effort to help so evidently worried his host, that he left them to themselves.

By the time the work was done, in the gathering dusk, and Esther, overheated, with muddy hands, came up the veranda steps, the storm had broken in a steady downpour of rain, while thunder rolled among the hills.

"Where are you going?" asked her mother, meeting her on the stairs.

"To wash first, and then to the Bluff House. The Tathems are there, and Virginia asked Mr. Noel to bring me down."

Esther spoke confidently, though she dreaded her mother's answer. It was decisive.

"She won't expect you in this storm. It's after nine now, and you're not even dressed. Mr. Noel is on the veranda. I'll tell him not to wait for you."

Esther had never yet disregarded an explicitly stated wish of her mother's. She had grown up under a calmly despotic rule, and, as yet, had not come to the point of shaking it off.

But then, never before had she wanted so much to do anything as to take that last walk with Noel. She realized that her future happiness hung on the events of the next few hours, and she did not mean to let it slip from her hold, if she could help it.

Grasping the situation, she was stung to swift action. "Thanks. Don't trouble. I'll tell him myself," she said, and without giving her mother time to pass her, turned and sped down the stairs and out on to the veranda where Noel was lounging in a habitant armchair.

Knowing her chance might be short, she spoke quick

and low: "It's no use. I can't come with you. I haven't had time to dress, and mother says it's too late and too rainy."

Here she caught her breath in a half-gasp, half-sob, for an amazing thing had happened.

Noel's arm was around her and he was drawing her away to the steps at the side of the house, and to the warm, wet, outer darkness.

"Hush, she's coming," he breathed in her ear, as Mrs. Sabine's step sounded in the hall. "She doesn't mean me to get any chance to-night if she can help it—goodness knows why. Without setting up to be an Adonis and a Miles Standish rolled into one, I'm really not a depraved character. But *she* doesn't matter if *you're* game. Come, let's run over to the wagon-shed. I *must* talk to you before I go, and no one can bother us there."

This school-boy flight on the part of the sedate Noel, underlaid as it was with earnest purpose, struck Esther's fancy as altogether delightful, and she laughed softly, feeling all at once young and gay.

"In the rain?" she asked.

His answer was to pull a large silk handkerchief from his pocket and spread it over her shoulders, shawl-fashion, then, catching her hand, he drew her down the steps into the night.

A fringe of old willows sheltered the open side of the wagon-shed from the house, and the long branches waved in the soft south wind, blowing up from far West Indian shores, and shook the rain from them in spray. From the lighted sitting-room windows long rays of orange light shone out, gilding the wet trees.

Once under the shelter of the roof it was dry, and here they paused, while Esther felt herself drawn close against the serge suit with Noel's cheek resting on her

hair. Losing not a moment in setting forth his cause, he broke into swift speech:

"I had meant to wait, but just at the last I knew I must make sure of things between us to-night. If this mine of LeRoy's comes to anything, I may not get back for months, and there may be times when letters won't get through, just when someone might be worrying you with morbid, far-fetched ideas about it being your duty to give me up. If anyone should, do you think you could just say to yourself, or to whoever puts an oar in: 'We know that we suit each other, and we mean to do our best to make each other's lives happy, and we're not going to bother our heads about what anyone else did do or didn't do!'—will you trust me, and say that?"

Amid the wondering consciousness that after all, the shadows on her life were more tangible than she had sometimes thought, and that Noel knew of their existence, Esther's supreme thought was of that mutual happiness he spoke of.

So there was no fear in her voice as she protested:

"Don't you think you're being very mysterious?"

"Not a bit of it. At any rate, mine are more cheerful mysteries than your mother's, who wants you all to go on being dreary forever over something that most likely happened before you cut your teeth. Being happy is a much simpler affair than being miserable if only one thinks so, and I feel it's a good enough mission in life to see to your happiness. Come now, aren't you going to promise me?"

"Promise you what?"

"That you'll stick to me and wait till I come for you."

"There's not much chance of my running away from here," she said, still trifling with the joyful certainty.

He gave her shoulders a little protesting shake.

"How can I tell who'll come along? When I come back for you, will you follow the trail with a tramp?"

"Oh, I'd love to be a tramp!"

"With me?"

"Yes," she whispered, and there was nothing very coherent to be said for awhile.

After a bit Esther made a protest:

"It's disgraceful for us to be perched on this shaft like roosting chickens."

"Not a bit of it. It's a sensible enough fashion to imitate."

"But I'll have to go in."

"There's no hurry."

All the same, he had to let her go presently, and making her way round the house Esther went in by a side door and crept upstairs. She did not want to meet her mother again to-night.

CHAPTER XXI

OWL'S NEST

WHEN Marcus Holbeach saw the last of Giles, who was replaced at the camp by an old colonel from Quebec, the sporting companion of years, he entered on a period of peaceful enjoyment when the futilities of life fell into the background, and he savored the joys of primitive man. The wind's murmur in the pines, the river's whisper amongst boulders and tree roots, soothed him with an infinite sense of well-being.

The silvery flash of a captured salmon awoke all his old keen instincts, and the heart of youth returned to him.

On this round of days came a messenger with a telegram from Jack LeRoy at Cobalt. It was long and ran thus:

Found Moses and specimens. Firm on chances, but risk, man with us got hold specimens and gone ahead. If Mr. Noel coming, better hustle. Meet me Chevai Blanc, St. Maudez.

Holbeach looked at the flimsy paper more than once, as though it implied a good deal to him. In reality, though he would be pleased if Jack LeRoy's air-castle showed some prospect of becoming brick and mortar, he would be better pleased still if its construction were long and strenuous enough to keep him away from Lanse

Louise for many a day. Since a brief note from Giles had apprised him of that worthy's defeat, all his hopes for Virginia, and through her for himself, were set on Hugh Tathem.

Then came a happy thought. He would send a messenger across country to the Tathems' camp on the York, with the telegram.

Tom and his wife were, he knew, about due to come down on their return. It was likely that they would stretch a point to go in the same boat as Noel, and he would ask them to stay at the Bluff House, and say that he had room for Hugh too, if he wished to come. A man needs to be deeply in love, to leave a salmon stream in the height of the season. Still, Hugh was young and had many such seasons in prospect. With this thought the shadow returned and Marcus Holbeach gave a sigh to the woods and streams he had loved so well, that others would love when his day was done.

And so came about that gathering at the Bluff House, all the Tathems coming down, for Cecily had gone back as far as her beloved Metis in the yacht, and there were only the three on the river.

The house was, as usual, dainty and cheerful, with its open windows and broad veranda. Miss Creighton was, as usual, quietly thoughtful for everyone's wants.

"It always seems the coziest house I know," said Mrs. Tom to her husband in their room, dressing for dinner, "but there's something different this time. I wonder if it's just my fancy, or if there's really anything wrong with Virginia. She seems so changed."

"My dear, ever since I've known you, I've been only able to wonder at the exuberance of that fancy of yours. Why, I never saw the girl more lively. She's quite woke up out of her dreamy way."

"You are a dear old stupid, Tom," was his wife's comment.

It was true enough that Virginia, greeting her guests that afternoon, laughed and talked more than usual, and wearing her smartest clothes, seemed to have come into sharper focus in the foreground than had the quiet girl of a few weeks earlier.

It took Mrs. Tom's innate motherliness to notice the dark circles under her eyes telling of restless nights, the distressed little curl of her upper lip when the resolute smile faltered for a moment. Then, to a keen observer, Miss Creighton's wistful face had a pinched look of anxiety, like a faithful dog's watching a grief it dimly understands, and tries to share.

If Holbeach noted any change in the atmosphere of the Bluff House he gave no sign.

The morning after their arrival happened to be Virginia's birthday, a date her father never forgot. The post brought her a string of pearls from a Montreal shop, and she opened the package at breakfast before Holbeach and the others. He watched her careless glance at the shimmering string, and saw that there was no girlish pleasure in it, that she made no instinctive motion to clasp the bauble on her neck, and that presently she moved away, leaving it on the table, whence Miss Creighton gathered it up.

Her words of thanks had been graceful, but the hand that he took in his fell limp and irresponsive from his grasp.

Presently, he tried another experiment. The others scattering, he called to her to come for a stroll down to the boat-house, but she made a hasty excuse, so unlike her former gentle alacrity to please.

Then he knew that somehow or other she had got at

the truth, and was suffering from it, and in the chill that crept around his heart he tasted anew the bitterness of his dead sin.

If this were a piece of Giles' work, he vowed to himself that worthy should pay for it, though no retributive justice could mend what was forever broken.

Father, governess, and friend, sympathetic as they were, seemed powerless to help. It was Hugh Tathem, who boldly took charge of the situation—Hugh, whom this sight of Virginia in her own home had aroused into an idiotic frenzy of devotion.

On that long summer day's sail before the party broke up, when Dorval had joined them, Holbeach found himself dropping absent-mindedly out of the discussion over Jack LeRoy's telegram, to watch Hugh's complete monopoly of Virginia. The boy had arranged a snug nest of cushions for her well forward from the larger group, and settled himself by her side.

If she were in a silent mood, he patiently waited for her to speak; if she condescended to any show of interest in his fishing tales, he frisked as openly as a little dog noticed by its master. Watching them thus, a new hope dawned on Holbeach, a hope of which he caught a reflection in Mrs. Tom's kindly eyes.

It was this same fishing talk that gave Holbeach his cue.

The Tathems and Noel had been seen off in the *Chateauguay,* and that afternoon Hugh had beguiled Virginia on a canoe expedition up the Southeast from which they had only returned when in the late dusk Holbeach sat smoking his after-dinner pipe on the veranda.

He watched the two young figures coming up the path, noting that Virginia's step was more alert, and yes, there

was the soft little laugh that he had not heard since he came down from the camp. Certainly, Hugh must be kept near at hand, at all costs.

Then came the brilliant idea which he proceeded to put into shape.

"Come and sit here by me, Virginia," he said, holding out his hand as they climbed the steps and the girl paused near him. She yielded, and though the hand he took was irresponsive, it did not shrink from his touch.

There had been a certain air of loneliness in the solitary figure in the dusk that brought a novel sense of compunction to Virginia, though comprehension was still far off, and was to come later, mingled with bitter tears of regret. Hugh immediately plumped down on the steps where he could get as good a view as possible of his divinity. Holbeach thought it prudent to bring him in as a reinforcement.

"Only think, Hugh, we've been forgetting all about Virginia's week. We must see to it at once before the river gets any lower."

Now Hugh, as well as all other Bluff House habitués, knew Virginia's week as an old-established river institution.

From the time when she could just grasp a light trout-rod, Miss Creighton and she had spent a week every summer at Owl's Nest Camp, and great was the pride of guides and sportsmen when the slim, quiet child showed herself a born adept at the craft.

But the joyous readiness with which Virginia had always hailed the prospect was lacking. A sudden memory of the last day's fishing with Jack LeRoy choked her as she murmured:

"Oh, perhaps it's hardly worth while now."

She might have saved herself the effort of the words,

for Hugh had seized on the plan as a kitten seizes on a ball, patting it and tossing it to and fro.

He calmly included himself in the scheme, wanting them to come across to his camp on the York, where he avowed the loneliness would be appalling.

Failing this, he jumped readily at Holbeach's bidding to Owl's Nest. The fishing would be prime after last night's rain, and no time should be lost in starting. It was positively wicked to think of thirty-pound fish picnicking round the place to-day with no one save old Colonel Marceau to throw a fly to them. Didn't Mr. Holbeach think it would be a good plan to start in the morning? Did Virginia think that she and Miss Creighton could be ready?

In spite of the new cloud overshadowing Virginia's horizon, and dimming her earlier faiths and affections, old instincts awoke at his picture of the friendless salmon. It had become part of her creed that all occupations should be dropped, all engagements canceled, when it came to the serious business of fishing. So now, while Hugh rattled on, she was mentally packing her bag, and when he paused, spoke rapidly:

"I don't see why we shouldn't. Shall I run and see what Miss Creighton thinks of it, father?"

The last word had its old gentle intonation, and a mist came before Marcus Holbeach's vision at the sound.

"Yes, do, child," he made answer, "and ask her if she can give us an early breakfast, and I'll order the buckboard at half-past six."

She went, and on the ensuing silence there came between the youth and the older man a few words of wistful hope and generous encouragement, words that sent the boy out into the soft darkness to work off his joyously dazed excitement in a long tramp.

The early move was made, and the next afternoon saw Miss Creighton established in a corner of the Owl's Nest veranda, looking as though it had been her home for years.

She always kept a special kind of coarse lace-work on hand as suitable for camp life and her position as chaperon. But, not being a woman who loved the monotony of fancy-work, as soon as the fishermen were well out of the way, she would don thick shoes and gloves and set out to scramble happily through densest brushwood, or among the riverside boulders in search of some desired flower or fern. At such times, though her appearance was witchlike, her heart and mind were twenty-five and not a day older. It is only in solitude that middle-age can venture to be as young as it feels, without fear of imperiled dignity.

And then came a season which Hugh Tathem never in the after years of a prosperous life forgot, for it enshrined the brief idyl of his youth. All day he was never far from Virginia's side. In the pearly gray of early morning, or in the evening primrose stillness, they fished in some golden-brown or deep-green pool. Their mid-day meal was eaten on a flat rock or gravel reach, and after dinner, when the older men smoked on the veranda, they too would heap a glorious fire of driftwood and sit between its light and the encompassing darkness of forest and river. Virginia was a fire-worshipper, there was no doubt of that, and while she sat dreaming, lulled by the ceaseless sound of the river, the snapping of burning twigs, Hugh watched the delicately outlined face all aglow with the flickering light.

The fine instinct of his devotion made him conscious of the change that had come over her. All was not well with her, he knew, but this knowledge only enforced his

conviction that his mission in life was to stand henceforth between her and all harm.

And Virginia? Her hurt had not been slight and it was no shallowness of nature that caused her to brighten in the warming atmosphere of the boy's devotion.

Her first glimpse of sorrow and evil had come very near home, and never again could her relations with her father be of the same unquestioning sort; though give her time, and something better might take their place. She was still sore from this scarcely comprehended blow dealt her by Giles. She had breathed no word of her new knowledge to anyone save Mrs. LeRoy, and it was a nervous fear of expressed sympathy that caused her to shrink from Miss Creighton's wistful glances, while she felt that any outspoken speech between herself and her father would as yet be intolerable.

Though inexperienced, she had quick intuitions, and at a time of less self-absorption she would have guessed the meaning of Hugh's ministrations, and done her best to save him from further pain. If Esther's companionship had been available, she might have found comfort in it. As it was, she shrank from all those who had made her world, for even Dorval's kind eyes had in them that comprehension that hurt her. Hugh alone had nothing to do with old, unhappy, far-off things, and she used him as one might use laudanum to still a raging tooth-ache.

The two had been fishing late in the dusk of an overcast evening, and a fine salmon lay in the bottom of the canoe as proof of their success. Virginia would have stayed at the pool till midnight if Hugh, reckless enough for himself, had not been prudent for her.

"See here," he protested, "we're a bit of a way from

camp you know, and I want to get down while we can see the rocks in the stream."

"Oh, I could find every rock in the dark," Virginia asserted, with a dexterous cast of her line.

"And snags and roots? Can you find them, too, when you can't see the ripples?" he scoffed. "Come now, be reasonable and put up your line. If we stay too late, your father may stop our going out to-morrow night."

The argument was effectual, and Virginia reluctantly abandoned her fishing.

Hugh was a bit uneasy for he knew that he should have taken one of the men with him to help steer the canoe down, but the temptation to have Virginia all to himself had been irresistible, and Holbeach had not seen their start.

Virginia was skilled in the use of the paddle, but she had not the strength of arm to hold back the canoe with a pole, or to turn it sharply against the onward rush of the stream.

How quickly the shadows gathered, spreading out from the trees that crowded each other on the banks! They were both experienced enough to know their peril as they peered ahead over the gray line of water for rock or sunken logs. Twice they had narrowly grazed such dangers, turned aside by Hugh's desperate effort.

"The next turn shows us Owl's Nest lights," he called encouragingly. But just as he spoke came a crash and rending tear, and Hugh, knowing what was coming, dropped his paddle and made a grab at Virginia, so that the two went into the water together.

If the current had fairly caught them, their chances would have been slight, but the same great uprooted pine root that had been their destruction was their means of safety. Caught against it, Hugh was able to draw Vir-

"'God knows I want nothing more than to take care of you always.'"

ginia along its trunk toward the not distant bank, until they both had a firm grip on over-hanging branches, and could pull themselves ashore.

Small comfort was there though, for that bank was little short of a rocky crag, and it took a desperate scramble, clinging to bushes and roots, before they could reach a mossy ledge level enough for them to drop down panting and exhausted. Even then, Hugh still kept a grasp on Virginia as though to prevent her slipping down.

"Oh, Hugh, our rods, and our fly-books, and the fish—such a splendid fish too!" was Virginia's first lament.

"And our precious bones, and our precious lives!" he tried to jest then, his excitement finding vent: "Oh, Virginia, don't you see that my carelessness has nearly been your death? And here you are dripping wet, and with the muskrat brook to cross and all that spruce-wood to wriggle through before we reach the camp."

The tonic force of danger had roused her and she laughed out at the tragedy in his voice.

"Well, it's no good crying over it! We can't get any wetter in the brook and we're not likely to be cold by the time we've scrambled through those spruce trees."

He was silent and all at once a breath of his earnestness seemed to reach her.

"Why, Hugh!" she said, gently, her hand on his arm. "You can't really think anyone will blame you. They all know how good you are to me and what care you always take of me——"

Her words let loose the passion in the boy's heart.

"God knows I want nothing more than to take care of you always. Don't you think you could let me? Your father would like it——"

All at once the girl's heart became as stone.

So her father was already seeking another means of

getting rid of her. How blind she had been not to understand. But Hugh, poor Hugh, he, at least, wanted her. What a pity she must hurt him by denying him what he craved for. For she could give him nothing, belonging altogether to another.

She drew away from his grasp. "Oh, Hugh, I'm so sorry, so sorry!" she breathed softly. In the dusk he saw her eyes as they were a pitying Madonna's.

"Can't you, can't you, really? I'd wait for ages, until you could give me some hope," he urged desperately.

She shook her head, so that the drops trickled from her dank locks over her shoulders.

"No, it's no use to wait. It'll always be the same," she decided.

The boy's face was haggard, and his voice hoarse, though his words were manful.

"Well, you can't prevent my waiting and trying again next year. We'll still be friends?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes—" she hesitated, "but I'm afraid it's all spoiled, as everything seems to be nowadays."

She gave a little shiver and her face looked wan in the dim light.

Hugh was smitten with swift remorse.

"What a brute I am to be keeping you here in your wet things—I don't wonder you think me a useless fool."

"But I don't, Hugh." She protested gently. "You know I like you awfully."

"What good's that!" he said roughly, then with a sudden thought: "If there happened to be anyone else, I think you're bound to tell me."

The dusk did not hide the warm glow in her face as she confronted him silently.

"So there is someone!" he said slowly in a sort of dull despair.

The realization of how her secret betrothal might look to others dawned on Virginia, but she did not flinch.

"Well, and if there is!" she panted.

The sight of her distress awoke his chivalry.

"Never mind, Virginia. I won't bother you any more just now. Only remember, next year I'll ask just the same thing over again."

He hardly knew what he was saying for his heart was as heavy as lead.

"Come now," he went on, "we've got to get home before the light fails altogether. Give me your hand, and we'll hurry on."

From thenceforth matters were strictly business-like and they had enough to do to mind their footing on the rough ground in the waning light.

Over one hill, down into a valley and then up the steep slope of the Owl's Nest, they made their way through thick brushwood and among boulders and swamps.

A disreputable, disheveled pair with wet, muddy garments, faces smeared with slime and with clammy hair, they appeared in the camp sitting-room.

Fortunately, they had not been missed, so their three elders were intent on a tranquil game of bridge. While Hugh explained matters, Miss Creighton dropped her cards, and hurried Virginia off for tender ministrations.

When she was wrapped in a warm dressing-gown, and Miss Creighton had shaken out and wiped the damp masses of her hair, Virginia's stoicism gave way, and with her head on the kind little woman's shoulder, she sobbed her heart out. Even then, no confidences were offered or demanded, but the tired girl was soothed and comforted by the contact with that faithful heart that gave so much and asked so little in return.

CHAPTER XXII

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

NEXT morning, while Virginia was still sleeping off the night's fatigue, Hugh Tathem started by a forest trail across country for his own camp on the York, there to wreak his griefs on the salmon. It was a glorious July day with a crisp wind rioting over the forested hills in from the great outer spaces of the Gulf.

The fishermen had gone off for the whole day, and Miss Creighton had plunged into the woods with her botany case, leaving Virginia in solitary possession of Owl's Nest. Solitude suited her best just now, after the proof she had received of the perils of friendship.

Stiff and tired from yesterday's chill and scramble, she was glad to lie in a hammock-chair on the veranda, listening to the harmony of the wind through miles of tree-tops, toning in with the river's deeper voice. The wreck of the canoe, their rods, and even the fish had been recovered that morning by the men, but no one could give her back yesterday's delight in river and camp.

The glamour was gone from it all and she was wondering how she could most naturally ask her father to let her return with Miss Creighton to-morrow to the Bluff House. After all, the week for which they had come was nearly up and perhaps it would be better to wait for Holbeach to mention the subject. She dreaded the end of the day and the fishermen's return, for Hugh's words, "Your

father would like it," stayed in her mind, and she had a guilty sense of having a second time disappointed him. He had never, save casually, mentioned Giles' departure to her, but she had a prevision that he would not let Hugh's reverse pass in that fashion, and she was right.

Holbeach's greeting to his daughter was even more kindly gentle than usual. The fishermen had had the best day's sport of the season, and when after dinner he said: "Feel up to coming down to inspect the day's spoils, little girl?" an instinct of pride saved her from the cowardice of an excuse.

The five silver-shining fish, ranging from twelve to twenty-five pounds in weight, were laid out on spruce boughs at the door of the ice-house, dug out in the bank.

The guides sat smoking nearby and Virginia had to discuss the weight and death struggle of each fish before she was free to go to the river bank and take her usual perch on a rocky ledge running out into the stream.

Holbeach took possession of the log that had been Hugh's seat. Above the tree tops a saffron sky glowed, and between the bronze-green of the banks the river caught its light and flowed a stream of gold. Holbeach drew at his pipe, settled himself more comfortably on his log, and then with his eyes on the girl's profile, dusky against the shining water, he spoke with careful lightness:

"Well, and so you're sending off all my men, one after the other. It's lucky Colonel Marceau is proof against you."

The kindliness of the words made an answer harder to give. Virginia tried to speak, but could get at no appropriate answer, so was silent.

"I had hoped that you and Hugh Tathem might have suited each other," he added more seriously, but still with no touch of blame.

"I'm so sorry I'm such a trouble to you," she found voice to say. Her tone was humble and yet it could not be but that some echo of her underlying sense of wrong found vent in it.

Then Holbeach for the first time took courage to speak to his child from something below the surface of things:

"You must never think that you could be a trouble to me, Virginia. I daresay I sometimes seemed careless, but the one last thing that matters to me now is to prevent your life from being spoiled as mine was—as your mother's was," he added in a lower voice, a voice that his daughter had never before heard.

The sound of her mother's name on his lips sent a wonderful new thrill of awe, mingled with tenderness, over her, submerging all that recent unhappy sense of wrong.

"And so you see, little girl, I've got, one way or the other, to see you happy."

Virginia bent down from her perch and slipped her hand into the one that closed over it firmly.

"Oh, father," she said with a little gasp, "I'm really happy as I am."

She would have given much to express more plainly her yearning sympathy with that brief glimpse of self-revelation, with that uncomprehended old sorrow, but perhaps he understood. Marcus Holbeach had all his life been quick to understand women.

"I daresay you are, for the present," he agreed, "but then you'll need someone to take care of you when I'm gone."

So placid were his words that their real meaning passed her by, and she thought him only speaking of his autumnal return to England.

"But there's Miss Creighton—and Mr. Dorval always looks after us, you know."

A bewildering new possibility flashed across Holbeach's mental vision. After all, Dorval was an active, good-looking man of little over forty, and it would not be so strange if Virginia had taken a girlish fancy to him. If he had paused to think he might not have put the idea into words. As it was, he spoke out:

"Well, but, child—surely it isn't Dorval you want to marry?"

The strain on Virginia's feelings broke in a laugh.

"Of course not," she said lightly. "He's a dear, but he always seems a sort of uncle, you know."

"Of course," her father agreed, realizing with the inevitable pang of middle age, her different standpoint. Knowing and guessing what he did of his friend's life and its hidden motives, the last thing he would have desired for his daughter would have been an attraction to Dorval, and yet it gave him an unpleasant twinge to hear him set aside as past all the possibilities of romance.

A silence fell on them while the shadows seemed to reach out from either bank to grasp hands across the flowing water. From the woods sounded a whip-poor-will's long-drawn, melancholy note. In that silence Holbeach was realizing the futility of all his schemes for preventing the weaknesses and errors of his youth from bearing their inevitable fruit in his later years. Try as he might, he could see no way in which his only child might stand between him and the coming loneliness. Well, after all, it might not be for long. In any case, the girl's happiness must count first, even if it were a matter of the world well lost. He would fight no longer, but would acknowledge, at least to himself, where her best chance of content lay. Meanwhile Virginia's thoughts

had flown off to the northern wilderness, where she pictured a camp-fire lighting a certain familiar face. She was brought back to reality by her father's voice, with a certain effort in it:

"Well, child, it comes to this. On the day when you tell me that you want to marry a man whom I know to be a good-hearted, honest fellow, no matter how little he has, I shall do my best to help you. Remember that."

"Oh, father, you're *good!*" she murmured in a tremor.

As the thought of Jack LeRoy's last evening on the Bluff House veranda came back to her, she could not but wonder if her father were thinking of it, too. It hardly seemed possible, and yet, she was sure his words held a more definite pledge than appeared on the surface.

Overhead, the sky was paling, and now the river's golden streak had narrowed into a silver line between the encroaching shadows. When Holbeach spoke again it was in a more everyday fashion.

"I had a line this morning from Noel. He had left the Tathems at Quebec and was about starting north with Jack LeRoy and the captive of his bow and spear, Moses Flynn. They had gone north as far as the railway runs, and were about taking to canoes. He seems actually in a state of excitement—a wonder for him."

"What about?" Virginia asked as he paused.

"Well, first of all about Mr. Flynn's specimens which were sent down to Quebec for him to assay. He thinks them marvelous! 'We'd need to be the biggest kind of fools to help coming out of this business millionaires, the whole lot of us,' he says."

"Isn't that splendid!" chorused Virginia. The millionaire prospect touched her vaguely, but her whole soul was wrapped in Jack's success.

Holbeach hesitated, before deciding to try his experiment. "But he put an 'if' to it," he added.

"An 'if'?"

"Yes; *'if* we can get our hands on the stuff,' he says. It seems the old man Flynn didn't let on to Jack at first that he was afraid some of his specimens had been stolen by a man who was with them before, a former miner, and apparently a troublesome customer with whom Jack had more than one row."

A little gasp came from the shadows, and Holbeach felt that his experiment was being too successful.

He made no sign, however, going on quietly:

". . . And the worst of it is, this man, after hanging closely round Flynn for weeks, as if keeping an eye on him, suddenly vanishes from the camp at the same time as two Chicago engineers who had been looking about for openings. It certainly seems as though he may have got the start of them."

A sickness of disappointment swept over Virginia. Was Jack to come back stamped a second time with failure? No failure would make any difference to her, but she knew what it would mean to him and how the iron had entered into his soul.

"And what will they do?" she asked blankly.

Her father struck a match and lit a cigarette before he answered. In the flash of the match he had seen the dark eyes fixed on him appealingly.

"They've hurried their start and kept their movements as quiet as they could. Perhaps they may get ahead of the other lot yet."

"But if they meet them?"

"Well, then, I hope they won't break the law. Noel says: 'We're ready for trouble, even if it comes to a fight.'"

"A fight?"

With the low words he saw how the slim hands clasped each other.

"Well, I'd trust those two to hold their own."

There was a touch of quiet amusement in his tone, which seemed to stir her into protest.

"Oh, father, why didn't you wire them to come back? The mine isn't worth it!" she cried.

"Even if I could have got at them, which I couldn't, they would have paid no attention, at least, if I know them—and quite right, too. Young men must go out into the world and take their chances, my dear."

The words were kindly said, but they met with no answer. Then, the desire to give comfort proving too strong for prudence, Holbeach went on:

"Noel seems very pleased with LeRoy, who, he says, had done wonders in getting their outfit ready before he caught up to them at an out-of-the-way little French inn. He was seeing to the last things then while Noel was writing, and they were starting in the morning. It's astonishing, he says, how much he has managed to pick up about mining, one way and another. By this time next year he expects to have him as good as half the engineers the colleges turn out."

He paused, but the only sound was a long-drawn sigh.

"And so you see, child, there's still a chance of your fortune being doubled in the Virginia Mine."

"My fortune . . . Oh!"

It was the only protest she could make against the thought that Jack should face hardship and peril on her account.

If her father understood this, he took care not to betray his knowledge.

"Yes. You don't suppose I'm going to leave you with-

out a pocketful of gold, like the lady in the song, do you? Well, anyway, it gives those two young fellows a good chance of a start. I think, if things go as well as I hope, you and I will have to take a canoe trip to the Virginia Mining Camp next summer and inspect our riches. How would you like that?"

"Oh, would you really go and really take me with you?" she breathed fervently.

"I might, if it's feasible," he promised. "A good deal may happen before that."

There was such comfort in this prospect that for a time it dimmed the specter of fear destined to haunt Virginia in many a coming night hour. There was comfort, too, in the sense of her father's kindliness, that familiar, encompassing kindliness that could not but vanquish the new resentment and shame.

Next day the two women left Owl's Nest, Miss Creighton serene in the possession of two new floral specimens, Virginia with four fresh cuts in the handle of her landing-net.

There was a passing mood of compunction as she looked at these latter scores and remembered who had carved them so carefully for her. But Nature has ordained that youth for its own preservation shall be comfortably padded in egoism against the jars of the outside world, and so, poor Hugh, glooming over his salmon-rod, passed into the things that were.

Dorval sat on his veranda, in the late afternoon leisure, reading the *Montreal Star* and smoking a cigarette. The click of the white wooden gate made him look up to see the approaching figure of Mrs. LeRoy.

Rarely did that worthy stir beyond her own gate, but when she went, it was in state. Decently attired in a black merino dress with a treasured old beaded cape, a

remnant of happier days, and a flat black silk bonnet, she had the air of a shabby duchess as she strode up the garden walk.

With a prevision of untoward news, Dorval rose to meet her.

"Why, Mrs. LeRoy, this is an event. You haven't been to see me since . . ."

"Not since you had the quinsy, Mr. Dorval, an' I fetched you a pot of black currant jelly, as does wonders for the throat."

"Well, now you've come, you must have some tea. Sit here," and he pulled forward a solid armchair.

"No, thank you, I don't hold with tea between my meals."

"Well, try a glass of wine after your walk."

The shadow of an old pain darkened her face, as she shook her head.

"I'd never touch a drop of it."

"Well, then, raspberry vinegar?"

This compromise was effected, and when Dorval's middle-aged servant brought a tray with sponge-cake and iced drink, there was a dignified greeting between the two women, who had a great respect for each other.

These preliminaries over, Dorval, who was feeling somewhat curious, tilted back his chair and asked:

"Well, what's brought you out to-day, Mrs. LeRoy?"

Smoothing her black thread gloves with a somewhat tremulous touch, she began:

"Mr. Dorval, you an' me's been good friends ever since the time you came here, the thinnest boy I ever seed, with arms growing out of your jacket."

Dorval laughed. The bitterness of that early struggle was gone now, though it had left a deep mark at the time.

"Yes, many a good bit of hot gingerbread you've given

me when I was always hungry. My uncle's housekeeping was not lavish, you know."

" 'Twas skimpy—that's what 'twas," she rejoined with conviction. "I told him once as 'twasn't fair feedin' growing boys on clam soup an' lobsters got cheap, a boat-load at a time."

"And he had a good answer ready, I'm sure. But we were young, and we rubbed through all right, at least I did."

"And you ain't old yet. But I didn't come over here to talk about things past an' gone. As I was saying, you've been a good friend to me many a day, an' I know would allays stand by me. So when there was this word of Jack going off again, I didn't even feel as I need come to talk it over with you. 'Mr. Dorval's in it,' says Jack, an' so I knew it was all right."

Dorval sat erect in his chair, his face suddenly grave.

"And now?" he asked.

"And now, as it seems, there's some idea of trouble ahead—not as Jack wrote much about it, but it's somehow there in what he didn't say. I get thinkin' at night, an' all those things comes to bother me, as I believe the devil sends into one's head just afore the dawn. You've heard say, perhaps, as that's the hour the Lord gave the devil to make his own mischief in. It's then, lying awake, as you get that trapped feelin' an Injun does if you shut the door tight when he's in the room."

The rugged face twitched and the hands worked more restlessly, as she drew a deep breath. Dorval, watching, knew that the mother fears were awake, and would have spoken, but she went on:

"There's no one knows like you do, Mr. Dorval, what cause I have to mistrust the tempting of the mines. It seems as though there were a voice in them, calling, an'

when a man's once heard it he ain't ever good for much else. 'T any rate, that was the way with me husband, an' our home went . . ."

"Yes, I know," said Dorval gently.

As she said, he had seen the lure of the hidden things draw a weak nature away from the humdrum routine of work and home to wild associates and ultimate ruin, but he knew that it would have been the same in any case. The handsome Jerseyman had no staying power in him.

". . . An' sometimes I wonder, leastways when the dark hours come, if Jack's got it in his blood, too. And so, after thinking of it all till I'm fair stupid, I says to myself: 'I'll go and see what Mr. Dorval thinks.' "

"What about?"

Evidently she felt no lack of sympathy in the brusque question.

"Well, you're too sharp a man for Jack to have been sent off on a wild-goose chase just because he might be in the way here, without your knowin' it, an' too good-hearted a one to let the precious days of his youth be wasted foolin' round in the woods after them will-o'-the-wisps . . ."

Here Dorval raised his hand to check her:

"Don't you know that it was I who first heard Jack's story and proposed this expedition to the others, saying I meant to put money in it myself? Now, folks here call me a close man, you know . . ."

"Not them as knows you."

"At any rate, I earned my money too hardly to spend it now on wild-goose chases, and for the rest, I think you can trust me not to play Jack a bad turn. As for his being in the way here—well, I won't deny that I can guess what you mean; but hadn't we better leave that to Time to settle? Time's often a good doctor, you know."

Leaning toward her on the arm of his chair, Dorval spoke with kindly earnestness.

She answered him with a shake of her head, while the underlying melancholy of her Celtic race sombered her eyes.

"There's hurts that's beyond Time, though, to doctor, and I want to save the young folks from such, if I can. But you're right. I'm an old fool, an' I wonder you're patient with me. Afore I go, I'll say as you mustn't think I'm meanin' harm of them as has helped me an' mine. Every one must look out for their own, and no blame to them. An' now I'll be going, thanking you, sir."

Dorval, seeing a chance of a diversion, was glad to let this allusion to Holbeach pass without notice.

"Why, there's Virginia coming up the road with Esther! She must have come down from Owl's Nest yesterday," he said, rising and going forward.

"Come up and pay me a visit. You see, I've got company," he called. Then, as they came nearer: "Why, Virginia, you've deserted us lately."

As he spoke he took her hand, and wondered if it was the damp overhanging hair that made her eyes look so deep and dark and her face so shadowy.

"Yes, we only came home last night," she said. Then without breaking into the usual glad details of sport, she went forward and stood in front of Mrs. LeRoy, saying:

"Why, we were just coming over to see you. The tide was on the turn, and we went for our bathe first."

Mrs. LeRoy scanned her with the contented criticism which can see no flaw.

"Yes, an' you've gone an' wet your hair again, as will take all the color out of it," she commented.

"Well, I twisted up the braid, but it always comes down."

"Aren't we to have any share of the party?" Esther put in, and then came the little stir of filling glasses and helping cake.

Then, feeling the expectant pause, Dorval started the subject which he knew to be in every mind.

"Well, I suppose you girls were going to have a gossip with Mrs. LeRoy over the last news of the adventurers? You've heard they're going to make a rush for it?"

"Yes, father told me yesterday," was Virginia's answer, while Esther, who had perched on the low veranda rail, looked at him steadily, as with a heightened color she said:

"I had a line from Mr. Noel about his fossils."

"I shouldn't think he'd have time to bother about fossils just now."

As he spoke, Esther felt the meaning in his tone, and wondered what her mother had told him.

With a smothered sense of resentment, she turned to Mrs. LeRoy, asking:

"And what does Jack say about it?"

"Oh, he don't say much. 'Tain't his way. He just says: 'We'll travel light, we two, and it will be clever canoe men as will keep ahead of us. Old Moses and another man can come after us with the outfit.'"

"But this man who owes Jack a grudge?" Virginia asked, her intent gaze on Mrs. LeRoy.

"Well, I guess he'll find Jack ready to talk it over," was the undismayed answer. "Lord, if 'tain't just wonderful the chances that boy gets at showing the stuff that's in him. You mind that time, Mr. Dorval, when the Scotch minister from Douglastown went through the ice, and Jack was just on the spot with his hockey stick handy? Not that he got much thanks for what he done. After lying half an hour on his stomach in the ice-water,

gripping the stick the man had holt on, with two or three hanging on to his heels, 'twas surely natural to swear a bit just to keep himself warm, an' yet the parson's feelings were that delicate, he never looked Jack's way again. Well, perhaps he knew best how little account his life was to save."

Dorval laughed out in hearty admiration of the web spun by the stout old heart to hide its fears.

"You're right! I expect Jack can take care of himself. And he's got a good second in Noel," he added, with a glance at Esther. Had he felt that new atmosphere of aloofness in her and been hurt by it?

"It's nice to be a man," the girl said, with a wistfully caught breath.

But this was heresy in Mrs. LeRoy's eyes.

"Well, women can do a lot if they only think it," she protested. "If we're crying out we're poor weak things, poor weak things we'll be. There wasn't a man along the shore could turn over a heavier boat, nor pull a better oar in a rough sea, than me oncet. Well, them days are over, and I'm a talkative old thing as had better be getting home afore the hungry chickens is crying shame on me."

As she rose to go, Virginia said: "I'll walk down to the ferry with you."

They left Esther at the gate, and as Dorval watched the two going off, their heads close together, he guessed the subject of their talk.

"Getting Jack sent out of the way! That's a bad idea to have got into the women's heads," he meditated.

CHAPTER XXIII

JACK'S ADVENTURES

ON THE northern bounds of civilization, where the railway halted and was replaced by tracks roughly laid on logs, trailing off to lumber camps, among the bare stumps and the tin-roofed slab huts, a little French inn formed an oasis in the raw desolation. Its bit of garden overhanging the water, its broad veranda and dormer windows, all had an air of the old Quebec village from which the landlord had come. Years before the railway had reached St. Maudez and the encompassing woods were cut down, Joseph Guilliou had settled himself here to cook savory meals for those who passed up and down the northern trail of lakes and rivers, or came and went into the great woods to mines and lumber camps, and incidentally to buy furs at a profit from trappers and Indians. Here Jack LeRoy had waited two long, impatient days for Noel, but now his waiting was ended, and in the late northern twilight the two sat at a little table on the veranda over the end of their evening meal.

"Well, that was worth coming for," said Noel, pushing away his plate with an air of deep satisfaction.

Jack was a favorite with the fat little landlord, who had spread them a parting feast of trout and broiled chicken, ended up with coffee that was his just pride.

"Well, you won't get another meal like it in a hurry, unless you catch it and cook it yourself," said Jack.

"Oh, I'm a fair cook," Noel agreed. Then, harking back to their one subject:

"And it was only yesterday you made sure they'd really gone up here?"

"Yes. They must have left the train at the rapids and passed here without stopping, or Guilliou would have known all about them. But yesterday some trappers came in who had been at their camp. There was no mistaking their description. They noticed Jim Coolen's lost forefinger when he gave them some 'baccy. I suppose they called in on the chance of such gifts."

Noel listened intently, elbows on table, his chin on his clasped hands.

"But a whole week or more's start! Man, what chance have we got?" he protested.

His chair tilted back, a cigarette in his mouth, Jack looked at peace with all the world, though his eyes were alert. He was bareheaded, and the evening light framed his close-clipped fair hair and showed the resolute lines of his impassive face.

"Every chance," came his quiet assertion. "Not having any reason to fear being followed, they're sure to take time to prospect as they go. They won't want to be leaving any likely spots behind them. Even if they've got the stolen stuff—as of course they must have or they wouldn't be here—that's not to say that they know the place it comes from. They've got enough country to go over to keep them from now to Judgment Day. I hear their boats are big and heavy, too, so that they can't do the farther portages."

"And you really expect to catch up to them?"

"What else would be any good expecting?" was the retort.

"And when you do?"

Jack grinned with a hint of hidden things, but only answered:

"It'll be easy, if luck's with us when we get near them, to hang back and make a rush past in the night. Once we've got our canoe cached and are off on the trail, I guess it will need a better man than Coolen to find us. He's not much of a woodsman. By the bye"—sharp and quick—"I'm counting on your being good at the paddle?"

It was Noel's turn to smile confidently, as he said:

"Look at my long arms and back. Mightn't they belong to an Indian? I won every canoe race I ever went in for at college."

"This won't be racing. It will be a long, steady grind."

"Well, I'll back myself to grind as long as you do. When there's the chance of dying a millionaire one can get a lot of grind out of oneself."

A longing came into Jack's eyes.

"And you really think the stuff's as good as all that?" he asked.

"I don't think. I'm sure of it. I doubt if there's anything better in all Cobalt and Gowganda. At any rate, I've never heard of a larger percentage of pure silver."

Striking one fist on the table, he went on:

"Five years' hard work, Jack, and we'll be able to start out and see the world like princes. An ocean-going yacht wouldn't be a bad thing, eh? And what a home I'll build for myself up in this wilderness"—with a wave of his cigarette toward the northern forest. "It would be rather fun to see them towing a grand piano up here, wouldn't it?"

Jack's laugh had in it an echo of hidden tumult. Before both men rose the vision of those who would share the good things their work was to win.

From the nearby woods came the hoarse, derisive note

of a swamp blackbird, and Jack, jumping up, spoke shortly:

"Better not be previous. It's not good luck. Have you got all your small things stowed away on you? Flask and compass?"

"Yes."

He leaned nearer, and spoke cautiously:

"Your revolver and your belt of money?"

"Yes."

"It was best to halve it."

"Yes. Then we're off soon?"

"Now. The moon won't set for two hours after sunset. It's luck for us she's young. It will give us another stage in between supper and bed, though there won't be much bed for us for awhile. Hullo, here's Moses."

They were both standing now by the steps, as a little wrinkled, wild-bearded man shambled up in a pair of enormous high boots. These miner's boots were Moses' badge of office and donned for all solemn occasions.

"Got the stores all in?" asked Jack, and Noel noticed now, for the first time, that he spoke as leader.

"Yes, sor," was the respectful answer. Moses was an old-country man and knew his place.

"Here, then," said Jack, stepping down into the open with a cautious glance around, "come and take a last look at the map. Show Mr. Noel your points over again."

The three heads were bent close together over the map of Jack's careful making. Here and there this map was spotted with red marks, several far apart, though in one place there was a little cluster of them. On this cluster Moses' grimy finger paused:

" 'Twas here as I found that big lump of quartz with the shiny cross on it. You'll be remembering it, sor?"

"I do," was Noel's emphatic answer, while his pencil

underlined the cluster of spots. "It's that I'm going for." Then, looking up keenly, "You're sure this Coolen fellow hasn't got a bit from there, too?"

Moses scratched his head and looked sheepish. The thought of that theft was a sore point to him.

"Well, there did be another small bit as I chipped off at the same time," he acknowledged.

"Confound you! When you'd got hold of stuff like that, you should have slept on it even if it made you black and blue all over," Noel grumbled. Then, with a new thought: "But was he ever at the place? Would he know it if he stumbled on it?"

Moses tried to look diplomatic, as he said:

"That's beyond my telling. He wasn't there in my company, but thinking it over of late, I've been wondering if the mean scut ever followed me in my prowls unbeknownst. You mind, Mr. LeRoy, the camp under the big rock-side where we found the skull lying by the brook, and the Frenchman, Alphonse, near stampeded the lot of us in the night, calling out as he'd seen an Injun ghost, most horrible like."

"Yes," said Jack grimly. It was one of the many dark memories he had resolutely put aside.

The old man's eyes glowed under his shaggy eyebrows. "Well, the spot's not more than twenty paces forenenst there, up along the brook side. You can't miss it."

"I'm not going to miss it," said Jack. Then, with a glance of reference to Noel, "that's where I thought we'd better camp and wait for Moses."

"Yes, that's our point," the other agreed. "And I'm glad it's so well fixed in his memory."

"Well then, Moses," Jack went on, "you'll just get there as quick as you can, turning off at the brook's mouth. I shan't blaze it, but you'll know it?"

"Would I know me own grandmother!" was the emphatic response.

"And if you don't find us, camp and wait. After all, we may meet you on the way, for we've got to rush it to take out our rights."

"True for you, sor."

The old prospector's face was all aglow with joy of the chances and risks that were the breath of life to him.

"And see here, Moses. There are seven of us in this, and your share may make a rich man of you."

"An' a queer sight I'd be in a black coat an' a shiny hat. But if the luck comes, I'll go a pilgrimage to Rome to make me soul, an' in each of me son's families I'll educate wan for a priest."

"Well, I hope they'll like it. But what I mean is, you've got to do your best for this. If you get there and find our marks jumped, well . . ."

The pause was expressive, but Moses seemed to understand it. "I'll do all that one Irishman's brains or pair of fists can do, you be sure of that."

"I believe you will, and see here—give Guilliou a hint to keep a quiet tongue about us."

"*He's* all right, sor."

A red sunset burned behind the trees and drew the trail of the Red Swan up the lake when the two men carried their canvas bags down to the water. At the ramshackle little landing-stage lay their loaded canoe, and Noel, looking down at it, said idly:

"It's a bit of a thing to carry the fortunes of the Argonauts."

"Its like was good enough for LaSalle and Champlain," said Jack, who had all a Quebec boy's knowledge of his

national history. There was no one about save Moses when the paddles took the water and the canoe glided off into the twilight. Bareheaded, slim and agile in their tight-fitting jerseys, both men knelt erect, silhouetted figures against the shining distance.

Everything was in their favor, for the lakes were unusually high for the time of year, and there would be few obstructions or portages.

For long days and for much of the nights life turned, to these two, into a dream of rhythmic paddle-beats. From the hour when the first red light of dawn pierced the low mists, to the time when the high-sailing moon tracked ahead of them a mystic path in silver, they sped on, with short rests for food and sleep.

Few words passed between them as they paddled, for they needs must speak louder then, and they could not tell what listener the forest might hide.

But as they rested on some mossy bank by a carefully damped fire, they talked over their pipes the endless talk of comrades. For comrades and staunch friends they were fast becoming in the mutual respect they were learning for each other.

If in these camp talks Noel taught the younger man many lessons of his craft, it was done under the guise of casual recollections that had in them no air of superiority, and he, in his turn, learned from Jack the lore of these woods and lakes where the latter had served so grim an apprenticeship to fortune.

They had met or passed no one on the river, until one day they came around a point on a dug-out full of Indians paddling downstream. There was no time to avoid them, even if they had wanted to, and soon they were exchanging the gossip of the trail.

"You belong camp up there?" was the first question, put with a pointing hand northward.

Jack knew that the way to answer an Indian's question is with another one, so he retorted:

"The men with the two boats—how far ahead are they?"

"Two days since passed their camp by big white stone. Fine camp, plenty fine tent. P'rhaps big men from Ottawa come see country?"

"Perhaps. How long have they been in camp there?"

"Three days, think. They no fish or cut trees. P'rhaps make pictures."

"Perhaps," Jack agreed. And with a gift of tobacco the pow-wow ended.

"Do you know the spot?" asked Noel, as they glided off.

"Yes. Rather too well. One of our camps was in there. It shows they know what they're about. To-morrow at noon we must begin to mind what we're doing."

From now out, Noel noted that Jack was distinctly in command, and he obeyed the slightest direction in silence.

The next day was still and damp, with a heavy mist overhanging the water. Dark and colorless, great spruce trees peered through the gray wreaths like specters, as towards evening the canoe crept softly up to a densely wooded island.

"We'll lay up here," said Jack, "and we'll do without a fire."

With a gesture he signed to Noel to help to draw up the canoe into the shelter of the trees, muttering: "We'll take no chances," and then led the way to the northern point of the island, where, with a thin screen of bushes between them and the water, they settled themselves. Any lack of cheer in their meal of hard biscuit and cold

bacon, washed down with water and devoured in a general atmosphere of dampness, was atoned for by the throbbing sense of expectation. Noel saw that even as Jack crunched his food, he kept his eyes fixed on the farthest spear-like line of treetops against the sky.

All at once a diffused yellow light momentarily scattered the mists.

"Look," said Jack, with pointing finger.

Noel stared from water to woods, but could see nothing.

"There! In a line from that sharp rock to the point!"

And now Noel saw an unmistakable blue curl of smoke against the darker woods beyond.

Silently they sat and stared at this significant sign. As though the yellow glow had done its work, it faded, and the mists dimmed the hillsides.

Jack looked around and saw that it all worked for good.

"We couldn't have ordered the weather to suit us better," he said. "It will stay misty to-night, but the moon's near full and will make it easy enough going."

"What do you mean to do? Slip past?" asked Noel.

"We'll have a look at their camp first," was the answer, and his friend guessed that Jack was cogitating some scheme.

Those men up there by that fire stood between these two and all that made life most valuable, and Noel, for his part, felt strange stirrings of the primitive man who fought with his own hand for his rights.

With night the spectral white mist deepened over the river, which here had broadened into a small lake embosoming two islands.

Jack and Noel had each taken his turn at a short sleep, one watching while the other slept, and now it was

midnight and Jack touching Noel on the shoulder to rouse him, they both stood up.

Silently their start was made. In this lake the current was so slight that they need put no force into their paddles, and Jack, as usual in the stern, guided the canoe in close to the shore.

Rounding a point, he checked Noel, and they sat motionless, their hearts thumping hard.

There, on a level clear space, lay their enemies' camp before them. Their fire, which still smouldered red, was not far from the shore. Further in among the scattered trees stood the fine new tent that had roused the Indians' admiration. Near it was a rougher lean-to, and here, no doubt, the men slept.

On the shore were two canoes. The lighter one, a birch-bark, had been lifted on to the bank. The other, a large dug-out, was all but afloat, tied by a rope to a tree.

"We'll have the big one," Noel heard the exultant whisper. Then each held his breath while, somehow, the feat was accomplished without a sound to rouse the sleeping camp. Hardly could they believe in their luck when they found themselves gliding out into the middle of the lake again with a ripple behind them that told of their captive tow astern.

They were facing upstream now, direct on their trail, but not a word was spoken until they had rounded the next point. Then Noel drew a deep breath and, pausing on his stroke, asked:

"What next?"

"We'll keep on for a bit, and then sink her with stones near the shore. She might come in handy later. Our friends will lose time hunting for her, and then have to travel double shifts, so we've done a good stroke of work."

Ten days later, perched on a rugged slope of thick-growing young spruce, Jack straightened himself and shut up his clasp-knife with a snap.

He had just cut the last gash, driven in the last nail on the stake that ended their boundary line and announced their claim.

"There," he said, "Virginia Camp is marked out. Good luck to it!"

His hand went up to the brim of his old soft felt hat, and Noel, standing at his side, followed suit.

"Good luck to it, and confound its enemies!" he repeated. Their hands met in a grip of congratulation on their achievement.

A week's toil of prospecting and surveying lay behind them with this result. They had not been niggardly in their boundaries, and had taken in the land some distance up both steep banks of the little stream running down to the navigable river. Every inch of it was densely wooded, and in the airless thickets fierce swarms of mosquitoes made them their prey, so that they both looked somewhat the worse for wear, scratches from branches varying the mosquito-bites.

The little ceremony over, Jack came back to facts.

"Now," he said, "the next thing will be for you to put the canoe in the water and get down to the settlement to take out our rights while I hold the camp."

There was no doubt or questioning in his tone, but Noel looked unconvinced.

"Hadn't I better wait till Moses and the Frenchman come?" he asked.

"What for? You can surely do it alone?"

"Sure. But if those others turn up, there will be four or five men in a devil of a temper, and no police 'round the corner."

But Jack showed no signs of yielding to pressure.

"That can't be helped," he asserted. "I'll make a new camp up the hill, off the trail, and lie low; and, see here, don't let them see you if you can help it. And when you meet Moses, hurry him along. We'll have grub now, and then you'd better be off."

Seeing there was no help for it, Noel yielded; but his heart misgave him, as he looked back before rounding a point and saw Jack standing, a solitary figure, on the bank.

"Say," were Jack's last words called after him, "you'd better fetch up another man, or even two if you can get them. No use killing oneself now. There'll be lots of work for them."

CHAPTER XXIV

FROM A CLEAR SKY

ON a crisp August morning, when the sea-breeze was rippling a blue line like a long tear in silk through the reflections in the calm water, Virginia sat on the Bluff House steps, sunning herself after her early swim.

Her hair hung loose, in a dark cloud over her shoulders, and beside her on a stool, just out of the alert fox-terrier's reach, was a lunch of rolls and milk.

A noontide silence brooded over house and grounds. Holbeach, who with the closing of the fishing season had left the camp, was out on one of his all-day sails along the coast in his yacht, the *Wenonah,* and might not be back before sunset. Miss Creighton was somewhere indoors, intent on her household, and Virginia had her surroundings to herself.

She was used to such solitary hours, and as long as they were spent outdoors, had never found anything irksome in them. Her dogs, the changeful aspects of woods and sea, had from childhood taken the place of companions to her. Of late, since life had begun to shape itself more definitely to her consciousness, like the rough-hewn marble under the sculptor's tool, solitude had been in a new sense a refuge to her.

Sitting there, her thoughts strayed idly from one visible thing to another, as our outdoor meditations have a

way of doing. First, she studied with a critical eye the stately American yacht that had come in at daylight and anchored off the Point, the Stars and Stripes and the owner's flag making bright spots against the dull August green of the hillside.

Then the garden, stretching from the veranda steps to encompass the curving carriage drive, brought her attention nearer home.

The sweet-pea hedge showed its crown of butterfly bloom behind the sturdier red and yellow splendors of the dahlia row, and each and every flower sparkled and rejoiced, shaking off the drops of last night's showers in the sunshine, and sending up their richest scents as a morning oblation to mingle with the more subtly penetrating breath from the surrounding forest.

"What a dear world it is to be alive in," the girl said to herself. "If only——" and the words trailed off into a sigh.

The sigh, in its turn, was checked at sight of Dorval's new buckboard coming smartly up the road, past the French Church, his pair of black horses driven by himself, while two brightly dressed ladies and a man in blue serge filled the seats. This sight, though interesting, was easily explained. The yacht people must either have had letters to Dorval, or been friends of his, and he was taking them for a drive round the mountain, as the hill that shut in Lanse Louise on the landward side was called. Dorval's wandering winters and large business connections made such summer visitations a not infrequent thing.

"Goodness, he's bringing them here, and such a fright as I look!" she said to herself, jumping up in sudden alarm. All the same, she was by no means a fright as she stood lightly poised on the steps, her loose hair stir-

ring with a wandering breeze and framing her expectant face.

Her slim, white, sun-lit figure was outlined against the warm shadows behind her, and to Dorval's eyes she looked, standing there, pathetically young and solitary. Virginia's gaze passed heedlessly over the unusual gravity of her friend's face. She was femininely absorbed in the sumptuous apparition of the two women strangers. Lady Warrenden sat beside Dorval, her full-blown figure swathed in string-colored laces, her wonderful locks crowned with a broad-brimmed leghorn hat, wreathed with shaded nasturtiums. She was too wise a woman not to know that she had passed the age for country simplicity of dress.

The lady in the back seat was of a strongly contrasting type, sallow and sinuous and black-haired, with irregular features and wonderful dark eyes in whose velvety depths lurked a mocking demon. The notorious Mrs. Darcy-Hyster counted more scalps to her belt, more lives wrecked, than could many a professional beauty.

Intimate enough with Lady Warrenden's recent past to have all a child's mischievous delight in this descent of hers upon Holbeach's Canadian home, she was silently observant, not bothering to keep up any talk with the plump, foreign-looking little man beside her, a fashionable errand-runner for women of her kind. With the eye of a connoisseur the lady had appraised Dorval, deciding that behind the quiet manner there lay something worth cultivating, and that it would be most amusing to bring a spark of fire to those deep gray eyes.

She was about to take the seat beside him, when Lady Warrenden's promptness forestalled her. Now that her raid was an accomplished fact, even the latter's superb

nerve wavered, and she wanted, if possible, to get a *carte du pays* from him.

This desire was foiled, she almost thought intentionally, by his suave reticence, and she had to put a strong control on herself to hide her growing irritation.

"Is that the girl?" she demanded brusquely, as the carriage curved toward the steps.

"Yes, that is the girl," was Dorval's brief response.

He had an idea that, for all her air of intimacy, his companion did not know Virginia's name, and he had no intention of supplying it for her benefit.

"Why, she's nothing but a school-girl!" was the somewhat blank comment. "I thought from what Giles Holbeach said——"

She checked herself with a swift glance at Dorval. She might have saved herself the trouble, for his face expressed no comment, though inwardly he was fuming: "Confound Giles Holbeach. So this is more of his work."

Dorval was man of the world enough to make a shrewd guess at the situation, and, guessing, had left his usual occupation to come and stand guard over Virginia in her father's absence. The instinct of shielding the girl from disturbing forces was intuitive to the man who had watched her growth from childhood with almost paternal interest.

"Here are some friends of your father's," he called to Virginia. "I saw the boat was out to-day, so I came up to show them the way."

If there was a note of warning in the words it passed Virginia by.

"Friends of your fathers——" the phrase brought back certain words of Giles': "Then you could get to know your father's friends and help him entertain them."

Here was her chance to show what she could do. She was on her own ground, and with Dorval's and Miss Creighton's moral support behind her she would strive to act so that her father must feel she had a right to her place in his home.

All immature self-doubts and shyness fled before such a spur, and a semi-proprietary pride lit Dorval's eyes as he marked the air of dainty, hostess-like graciousness with which she came down the steps.

"Oh, I am so sorry father is away, but I hope you won't mind waiting," she said, smiling up at Lady Warrenden, whom she instinctively picked out as leader.

The latter's smile was a bit forced, while the scrutiny of her eyes was hard. She was keen to note the possibilities of the budding womanhood, to appraise the future power of face and manner. There is nothing that so surely arouses the enmity of women such as she as that one supreme weapon of youth.

So this was the force that stood for respectability and a decorous old age in Marcus Holbeach's life, an old age in which she might have no part. What luck it was that the girl had not possessed enough worldly wisdom to seize the chance offered her through Giles by her father; and, oh, what a narrow escape she herself had had in the failure of that carefully planned combination of heir and daughter. Coming across Giles at Newport, Lady Warrenden had got enough out of him to be able to piece together the rest, and the result had been this cruise up the Gulf to Quebec. There was no trace of these thoughts in her mellifluous tones as she responded:

"So this is Mr. Holbeach's daughter, our little hostess." Then, as she let Dorval help her down, and stood holding Virginia's slim brown hand in her wonderful soft white one, she went on:

"Wait! Of course we're going to wait when we've come to the very back of beyond to hunt up that father of yours, child. At least I am—I can't answer for you, Clarice. This is Mrs. Darcy-Huyster, little girl, and this is Mr. Tom Devon, commonly known as Toby. But I can't tell them your name, for if I've ever known it, I've forgotten it."

"Virginia Holbeach," was the simple answer.

"Oh!" Lady Warrenden stared, all the time thinking hard in the back of her brain.

"Why, that was the name of the lovely Vandyke lady at Holbeach Manor," the other woman put in. "You remember, Violet, you talked of copying her dress for that big charity ball."

For all the artlessness of the speech, Lady Warrenden knew that it was meant for a reminder of Holbeach's firm refusal to allow her to copy the family portrait and of her own resultant display of temper.

Virginia, too, winced at this mention of Holbeach Manor. Since the momentous interview with Giles, that had overshadowed her outlook on life, her father's English home had become a forbidden Paradise in her fancy, a place from which for the cruel sake of others' sins she must always be banished. She had of late surreptitiously hunted up some old photographs of favorite horses and dogs that her father had from time to time brought from England. Carefully studying their backgrounds of house and park and garden, she had got at a more adequate idea of his English surroundings.

Dorval had been quick to mark the pained flush and quiver, and it was he who came to the rescue, not of Lady Warrenden, but of Virginia.

"Shall I find Miss Creighton, Virginia, and warn her of our invasion for lunch?" he asked.

The girl started, thus recalled to her hostess' duties.

"Oh, will you, please?" she said gratefully. "And you'll all come up and sit on the veranda, won't you?" she appealed.

Lady Warrenden meant presently to inspect the house, about which she was so curious, but now she was content to take possession of a deep, cushioned chair and to proceed with her study of Virginia. Meanwhile, the two other visitors, a bit bored, had retired to a corner where they became engrossed in a tale told by the lady, with many explosive appreciative giggles on the man's part.

During these few moments Lady Warrenden had decided on her best course. It would be useless to try to hide a face and figure like that in the backwoods much longer. Such a girl must soon make herself felt, and it would be best to make an ally of her as quickly as possible, so as to have some claim on her gratitude in the day of her power.

"Come, sit here close by me, and let's have a cozy chat. I feel as though I'd known you since you could crawl, for of course your dear father was never tired of talking about you, his only one——"

A fine instinct warned Virginia as to the truthfulness of this statement, but she would not heed its voice.

"And," the velvety voice went on, "I was struck all of a heap, as they say here, when I found out from poor Giles, at Newport, that the little girl had come to the breaking of hearts. Why, he's disconsolate, you little wretch!"

Virginia, not used to such outspoken methods, flushed vividly. Then, her deep resentment against Giles making itself heard:

"I don't believe he ever really cared for any one but himself," she said, with the vindictiveness of a frank child.

Lady Warrenden laughed with real delight. She had found out just what she wanted to know. Virginia's refusal of Giles was no bit of girlish shyness, already repented of, but the sheer, instinctive shrinking of a young creature from a cold-blooded egotist.

"You dear thing," she cooed with a greater measure of sincerity. "Well, as your father isn't near enough to hear me, I must confess that I never had much use for cousin Giles, whom he sets such store by. I know he's clever and all that, but a prig's a prig, and I've no use for them, and neither have you, I see. And who is this nice little lady?" putting up her long-handled glasses.

This nice little lady was Miss Creighton, trim and serene in her plain gray linen dress.

The Bluff House staff was trained to meet emergencies, and after a few orders given could be left to itself while its mistress obeyed, without questions, Dorval's hint that her presence was needed by Virginia.

"Well, at any rate *she's* not the girl's mother. Marcus always had better taste than that," Lady Warrenden inwardly decided after one glance at the ugly, wistful face.

"And so you have a chaperon to protect you against the wiles of dangerous bachelors like Mr. Dorval," she jested, with her usual good taste.

"But I suppose you have young men about, too? I think cousin Giles spoke of a party? Where are they?" she asked, as though they might be hidden under the sofa.

The best thing, she thought, that could happen now, would be to see the girl safely married in Canada.

Again Dorval took the answer on himself, as he lounged against the rail before the seated women. It was giving him great joy to fence with this lady's questions.

"You should have come a fortnight earlier if you

wanted to see our gilded youth. Now that the fishing season is over they've all been taken away in cold storage like the salmon."

Lady Warrenden, with a way of hers, caught at the one fact that personally concerned her.

"Oh, the fishing season's over, is it?" she said. Then turning to Virginia: "Then, I daresay your father will be ready to come on to Anticosti with us, to-morrow or next day, won't he? If he doesn't come back to-night it would be a great joke to carry you off in his place, wouldn't it?"

Virginia caught a quick glance of alarm interchanged between Dorval and Miss Creighton, and a new spirit of perversity awoke in her. Why did they all seem to know more of her affairs than she did herself?

"Oh, would you really? I've never been there yet," she breathed enthusiastically. "I could get my things together in half an hour, couldn't I, Marraine?"

Miss Creighton's feminine intuition had lost no time in appraising their guests, and she felt as though she were being asked to thrust her pet lamb into a tigress' den.

"Yes, dear, I daresay you could," she wavered, with appealing eyes on Dorval; "but do you think your father would care for you to go away without his consent?"

Lady Warrenden put up her chin with a touch of the *grande dame* manner she kept in reserve behind the more up-to-date, hail-fellow-well-met-ship she affected.

"I'm sure Mr. Holbeach would be quite willing to trust her to his oldest friend," she began, when Dorval turned from staring seaward, to face her with a smile that held a reserve of triumph.

"Fortunately, he can settle that for himself," he said,

for there's the *Wenonah* creeping round Cap Rouge. The wind is light, but he should be here in an hour or so. I expect he was afraid of being becalmed if he stayed out."

He had his reward for his morning's exertions in the flicker of startled fear that he caught in Lady Warrenden's violet eyes, before she pronounced her delight in his news.

He saw that the visitor was not quite so sure of her welcome as she had implied, and he guessed that the cause of this visitation had been the dread of a lost sovereignty. These theories were confirmed as he heard the lady say hurriedly to Virginia:

"Do you know, my dear, I think I'll ask you to give me a bed to-night and to send on board for my maid and my things. It would be a change from being cramped up in a cabin, and I'm sure the others wouldn't mind, would they, Clarice?"

The last words were addressed to her friend, who had strolled toward them, the little man in tow.

"Oh, dear, no. I shouldn't think so! But we're not going to wait lunch for Mr. Holbeach, are we? It's nearly one now, and that boat with the long name is still nothing but a white speck. Toby and I want to get back on board before the others go off anywhere."

This speech was not over-polite, but then, Mrs. Darcy-Huyster was finding things slow. The dark, good-looking man didn't seem to have any attention to spare for her, and she knew that the one woman left on the yacht was having her innings with its master.

"Well, I declare! What manners!" commented Lady Warrenden lightly, thereby wording Virginia's involuntary thought. The latter looked in appeal at Miss Creighton, but as that lady maintained a discreet silence,

she had nothing for it but to say as cheerfully as possible:

"Oh, we never wait for father when he's out sailing! I think lunch will be ready at one, won't it, Marraine?"

"Yes, dear," was the placid answer.

"But, you naughty child, you never told me if you'd give me a bed to rest my poor bones in," said Lady Warrenden, as pathetically as might be.

"You sound quite Shakespearean—'an old man weary with the cares of state'—only in your case it's hardly the cares of state—" put in Mrs. Darcy-Huyster, but her friend took no notice of the gibe.

"Oh, of course, we'd love to have you! How surprised father will be!" Virginia exulted, jubilant at the thought of her successful hostesship. Two, at least, of her hearers agreed with her most emphatically.

It was more than an hour later when Holbeach, strolling up from the yacht, at peace with all the world, came in sight of the after-luncheon group on the veranda, and realized, with a gasp and muttered word, the invasion of which he was the victim.

Lulled into idle serenity by his sojourn in the shining outer spaces, he had been anticipating an afternoon lounge in a big chair on the shady veranda, his day's letters and papers on the table beside him, Virginia with the dogs somewhere within sight. What a change was here!

He had had no warning or hint of what was about to befall him. On passing the American yacht that morning, he had, as a matter of course, looked up the owner's flag and club, but the French name, belonging to a well-known New York yacht club, only meant a man met casually at Cannes, and he had given it no further thought.

This apparition, on the contrary, meant a great deal to him. As without any perceptible pause he came forward, he took in every detail of the grouping at a glance, and his face hardened for the fray.

He marked the admiring interest that lit Virginia's face as she hovered by the deep chair where Lady Warrenden lounged in lazy grace. And Violet was smiling at her, playing off, for the girl's subjection, the pretty turns he knew so well. So that was her game, was it? Well, fortunately, most games can be played by two, and he meant presently to have a hand in this one himself.

Dorval's horses were at the door, and Mrs. Darcy-Huyster, that lady for whom he, Holbeach, had always entertained so deep an antipathy, stood near, with her squire-at-arms, as though ready to go. How Dorval came to be in the affair he had no time to wonder, but, somehow, he was glad to see him there, not far from Virginia.

He knew it for an old trick of Lady Warrenden's when uncertain of her ground, to rush in with the first word, a trick he recognized as she hurried to speak before he could utter any greeting:

"Brave man! He faces an invasion like the old guard at Waterloo!"

The full battery of her eyes and smile was on him, though she never moved her head from its rest against the cushions.

Mrs. Darcy-Huyster's elfish glance swept him with a knowledge of his discomfiture, as she chimed in almost simultaneously with her friend:

"We can bless our stars we're on the point of decamping. He can't pick a quarrel with us, can he, Toby? We'll leave Violet as a peace-maker till to-morrow, or rather as a hostage for you and your girl."

Holbeach had by now reached the hand-shaking stage, which he accomplished with all possible suavity.

"One at a time, please," he protested. "So this was what the smart yacht meant! And to think that I never guessed when I passed it this morning! And Lady Warrenden is a hostage, is she?"

He had reached Virginia, and as he laid a hand on her shoulder, his always quiet voice took on a new gentleness:

"Well, little girl, what have you to do with all this? Have you upheld the family credit with these gay folk?"

Two, at least, of his listeners noted, but with widely varying feelings, his punctilious identification of the girl with himself and his family.

Lady Warrenden gave no sign of mortification as she caught up the question.

"Oh, she's been a dear, from the first sight of us. She actually managed to seem delighted with it. Whatever do you mean by hiding such a gem in the woods? You'll have to let me bring her out next season."

Holbeach kept a serene front to this attack.

"All in good time. She has time on her side, you see, and doesn't need to grab at the fruit on the bough, as you and I must."

"A bit heavy-handed," Dorval made inward comment.

"Besides," he went on, "the child's a good Canadian, and would rather be on a salmon-stream or a yacht than in a stuffy London drawing-room, eh, little girl?"

Did Virginia recognize the appeal in his voice as she made loyal answer?

"Yes, father."

"Yes, father," mimicked Lady Warrenden, emphasizing an undertone of resignation, that had been barely per-

ceptible. Virginia, with her heart in a mining-camp in the wilds of northern Quebec, had few girlish hankerings after the big world she had only seen from the outside of hotels and trains, but the longing to be recognized by her father had been roused to fresh life.

"It strikes me there's a dubious sound in that," Lady Warrenden jeered.

It was Dorval who came to the rescue.

"I'm sorry to hurry you," he said to Mrs. Darcy-Huyster, "but the ponies don't like standing—the flies bother them so."

"And you're dying to get us off your hands," that lady retorted. "Well, you've been an angelic martyr. Now it's Mr. Holbeach's turn. Come, Toby! See you tomorrow, young woman, with your bags. Hope you're not sea-sick." Without waiting for an answer the lively dame scrambled in, and Dorval promptly drove off.

Holbeach looked after her with slightly veiled disgust.

"If she hopes to see Virginia sea-sick, she'll be disappointed," he commented. Then, turning to face Lady Warrenden, "But where does she want us to go?"

"Oh, we're determined to carry you off on our cruise to Anticosti," the latter made answer, as casually as if she were sure of the response.

"And what does your host say to that?" Holbeach demanded sardonically.

"Oh, he was quite keen on our fetching you. He said it would be a good thing to have someone who knows the island."

"A pilot, in fact. I'm sorry, but I have no certificate."

"Nonsense. Of course we've got a man for that. You'll come, won't you? Surely the child needs a sight of people now and then." Then, with a smile at Vir-

ginia: "Do, dear, pick me some of those sweet-peas to wear. I haven't seen a fresh flower for a week."

The girl obeyed, though longing to know what her father would say.

Apparently unobservant of his silence, his companion talked on:

"After all, yachting soon gets monotonous. I believe if you don't come with us, I'll stay on here for a bit. I might go back by the easy land way . . ."

"You're beyond the region of easy land ways here," Holbeach announced, with a visible touch of satisfaction. "You would either have to go to Dalhousie in the dirty, and not over-safe old mail-boat, or else take the crowded fortnightly tourist steamer up to Quebec. I'd advise you to stick to the yacht."

Virginia, down among the flowers, thought she caught a vexed laugh and a protest:

"You're certainly not a very pressing host!"

"Did you expect me to be?"

She distinctly heard the low-toned rejoinder, and her heart sank with the freshly aroused sense of surrounding mysteries.

She loitered farther on, and when she came back her father was smoothly discoursing on the local features of the landscape to a somewhat sulky-looking listener.

CHAPTER XXV

LADY WARRENDEN'S RETREAT

VIRGINIA, not sure whether her presence was desired, would have taken advantage of a stroll through the grounds to slip away before tea time, but as she dropped behind, her father called her back and kept her beside him, with an arm through hers.

Over the tea-cups on the veranda, Lady Warrenden rallied from her temporary depression, making another determined assault on Virginia.

The splendors of the London season, the out-door pleasures of a Cannes or Cairo winter were dangled before the girl, who listened with a sore heart. Why should a stranger tell her of things which her father could have given her if he chose?

Was it possible that Lady Warrenden *knew* the reason of her seclusion, and was mischievously amusing herself with suggestions that could never materialize?

Holbeach's quiet face, as he lounged in a deep chair, smoking, offered no solution to these problems. His stillness may have invited Lady Warrenden to mischief, for she made a direct attempt to draw him into the talk.

"I suppose you mean sooner or later to let her see something of the world?" she demanded impatiently. He sat apparently absorbed in balancing a biscuit on the fox-terrier's nose, as he answered:

"Oh, she's something of a traveler already. Let's see, Virginia, where all have you been?"

"You know, father, Miss Creighton and I were two winters in Florida and California; besides that trip to the West Indies," Virginia said, wondering why her father could not have told that himself.

"That's not a bad bit of the world for nineteen, besides New York and Montreal, is it?" he asked.

Lady Warrenden looked unimpressed.

"But all *en touriste,* eh? Yes, it's the world in one way, and not in another—geographically, but not socially. Now, if you'd give me the chance, I could show her something very different."

"I've no doubt," was Holbeach's polite retort, in which she alone read the sarcasm.

Undismayed, she went on:

"I'm going to see something of American autumn life, staying with people about the country. Then I'll sail for home early in October. Suppose you let me take her with me."

Helpless at feeling her future thus played battledore and shuttlecock with, Virginia scanned each face closely, but could gain little satisfaction.

Still trifling with the dog, Holbeach answered tranquilly:

"Thanks, but when Virginia goes to England, it's with me. We're rather thinking, she and I, of starting off around the world this autumn, just by our two selves. She wants to buy some kimono things in Japan, and then she would have a glimpse of the big world in India. The Viceroy's by way of being a cousin of ours, you know."

A duller person than Lady Warrenden would have noted the girl's amazement, but she knew too well what lay behind Holbeach's quietude, to venture more than:

"My poor little scheme looks very meager beside that." Then dropping the subject: "But aren't you going to show me 'round your domain? I suppose you have a motor-car here."

"No, they're not worth the trouble they give on these rough roads and steep hills. I'll give you a turn in the buckboard, if you like."

"What's that? Like the thing we came in? All right. Only not for long, for I must have a nap before dinner. This strong air makes me so sleepy," and she yawned corroboratively. Privately, she was wondering how her hair and complexion had stood the assaults of sun and wind, and longing for a half-hour of her maid's ministrations. This was not the moment in which to weaken her charm in Holbeach's eyes.

"Yes, it's apt to make strangers sleepy," he suavely agreed.

"Virginia, run and tell Louis to get the trap ready."

Lady Warrenden laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"And when they send my maid up, you'll install her, dear?"

Virginia, looking into the still beautiful face, intuitively read there some sign of defeat and warmed with generous pity.

"Oh, yes," she said. "You shall have the south spare-room. That's pleasantest, isn't it, father?"

"That belongs to yours and Miss Creighton's department," he said, as he lit a cigarette.

"Oh, I'm sure any room's lovely," cooed Lady Warrenden. "Only think, child, of your father always pretending to me that he camped out here in a hovel in the woods."

"We can supply you with a hovel in the woods, as well. What would she think of Owl's Nest, Virginia?"

In her new partisanship the girl declined to see the incongruity of the association.

"I'm sure she couldn't help loving it!" she protested gayly.

Their guest was on the alert.

"Is that the haunt of mosquitoes and salmon I was warned off from?" she asked.

"Yes, that's my fishing-camp. You'd better hurry Louis, Virginia," and Holbeach strolled to the end of the veranda, as though to end the subject.

Virginia stood on the steps watching the buckboard drive off, with a great sense of temporary relief. She was tired from the unusual effort demanded of her, puzzled and disheartened by the consciousness of unknown and contending forces around her. The shelter of her own room was welcome, but as soon as she had arrayed herself more daintily, she fled to the assured solitude of outdoors.

At the foot of the boat-house steps there was a sharp angle of overhanging bluff, where the afternoon shade was coolest, the breeze from the Bay freshest. Here she stretched herself on a slope of sand, still warm from the morning sun. She had meant to think, think hard and probably unhappily, but Nature's lullaby was too strong for her. The ripplets of the rising tide crooned on the shingle, the cormorants croaked as they flapped heavily from pole to pole, the sails of a schooner beat like drums as she came around on her tack, but all the sounds melted into each other and then into silence, as she slept.

Presently dreams disturbed her, dreams of trouble and of her father's voice, with an unaccustomed anger in it. Then with a start came distinct words, and she knew that he and his guest were on the platform almost immediately overhead.

"I should like to impress upon you your mistake in thinking I have not valued the child because I kept her hidden away here. On the contrary, I set too high a store on her to risk bringing her into contact with the people I had chosen as associates."

Virginia realized that her father spoke of her, and each word dropped into her heart to be stored as a lifelong treasure, even while she shivered with a vague fear at the steel-like hardness in a voice she only knew as gentle.

"Meaning me?" came from Lady Warrenden.

"If you choose to put it so," was the dry retort.

"And if Giles had married her, was she still to be kept in a glass case?"

"She would have taken her proper place in my home."

"And in such an Arcadian idyl, where would I have come in?"

"That is hardly worth considering, as he didn't prove man enough to win her, but, if you care to know, I shall not leave here again without giving her the choice of coming to England and being introduced as my daughter."

There was a pause, as though his hearer were digesting this information. She was subtle enough to guess that she herself had shaped this resolution within the hour, and the knowledge could not have been pleasant.

"It won't be easy," she said at last, with the strain of forced composure.

"Nothing worth doing ever is easy. I was a coward. or I should have done this long ago. It may be too late now," he added gloomily, and, alone in her corner, Virginia flushed guiltily, as though he were reading her thoughts.

"You don't think she'd hesitate?" came the incredulous question.

"God knows."

"Does she guess—how things are, I mean?"

"I think so—lately."

"Poor child!"

There was an evanescent touch of womanly softness in the words, but it only seemed to irritate Holbeach.

"Thanks, but I hope she doesn't need your pity. She has, at least, had a happy childhood."

"Yes, but it's *after* that matters."

On the words came another pause, in which Virginia caught her breath, for what was to follow. It came in Lady Warrenden's most seductive tones:

"If she does come, you'll let me have her sometimes, won't you? Really, Marcus, I like the child, and you surely know I'd take care to do her no harm."

What harm could she do her, and why need her assurance be so earnest, the girl wondered.

Holbeach, though, seemed to be in no uncertainty.

"You could not prevent such a false position doing her harm. You know, Violet, I don't want to be unnecessarily frank, but you must see that I should be a weaker fool than you take me for, if I could not keep my daughter from . . ."

"From such as me! Thank you."

There was no silvery note in the laugh that followed the words. There was a silence before Holbeach spoke, with the determination of one facing a hard task.

"You must have known that I never wished or intended you to come here, and it was treachery to me to do it in such a fashion and with such people. Of course, it was Giles who put you on my track."

"He told me, yes. Well, I suppose you want me to go?" was the sullen response.

"Yes. You can go back to the yacht without us tomorrow morning."

"Oh, I can go to-night. Pray, don't stand on any ceremony," and it seemed to Virginia that with her reckless laugh she had risen and moved across the platform.

"Hush!" came Holbeach's quick caution, "here's my man coming to look for me, and—yes, it's your host who's following him."

"Let's hope, he, at least, is anxious for my society."

Those were the last words Virginia heard plainly as the steps receded, though she could mark the greetings of a sharper foreign voice, mingled with Lady Warrenden's pretty outcry.

Then, with solitude there came to her that realization of her first contact with the world's sin and misery, a realization which marks an epoch in a young life.

Ignorant as she was of the world, the knowledge of what this woman had been to her father made her face burn. That momentarily kindly thought, expressed in the "Poor child!" made the pain keener, linking the careless pleasure-seeker with her mother's fate. Had they both been equally wronged and, worst thought of all, was he now cruel to this woman on her own account? Was he giving up the companion of years to do his child a tardy justice?

It would not be easy, he said, and he had been cowardly not to do it before. Why, if it were to cost him so much, should he want her at all, now when it must spoil her life as well as his own?

"Oh, Jack, Jack," she sobbed at last, "why can't you take me off to the woods with you, away from all this cruel world, where I don't seem to have any right place?"

For awhile she lay there on the shingle, sobbing with the utter abandonment of youth over its first sorrows. But Virginia's was too steadfast a nature to allow her to shirk her responsibilities for long.

Perhaps at this very moment her father might be looking for her to play the hostess, and feeling that she had carelessly failed him at the crucial moment.

Whatever he may have done in the past, to-day he had been loyal to her, and instead of the help she should have given him in return, here she was with swollen eyes and tear-stained face, of no use to anybody.

With a startled glance around on the lengthening shadows and deepening tints of coming evening, she jumped up, and dipping her handkerchief in the water, sponged her face with it.

There was looking-glass and comb in the dressing cabin at the head of the steps, and running lightly up, she drew a sharp breath at sight of a long tan glove lying on the platform floor, sole relic of the late fray. She caught it up with intention to restore it to its owner, and then realized that it might be somewhat awkward to account for her presence there. Her father was sure in the mere course of conversation, to ask her where she had been, and what should she say? For a second she thought of saying she had been out in her canoe, but she had never told him anything but the truth, and why should she begin now?

If any of them asked her she would just say that she had fallen asleep on the shore. Her home folk knew that such outdoor siestas were no unusual thing with her, especially after a bath.

She peered anxiously at her tragic face in the glass, but the tears of nineteen leave few traces, and by the time that she had rearranged her hair, her heavy-eyed pallor only lent a new depth of meaning to her face.

Slowly she went up the woodland path that her feet had always trodden so lightly. Crossing the stile and the road, she had her first glimpse of the house.

A stillness that seemed ominous brooded over it. No sound of voices anywhere, no figures in the chairs on the veranda.

Everyone must have gone to dress for dinner, and if so she might get to her own room unobserved. There, Miss Creighton would be sure to be on the lookout for her, with her smart dress ready to put on. Her lips quivered at the thought, and for the first time in her life she did not take that faithful care as a matter of course.

For a moment she thought of a rush up a side path to a back door, then a new sense of pride prevented her. The time was past for any such childish tricks. A rapturous yap and rush of the fox-terrier destroyed her last hopes of secrecy. At the sound, Miss Creighton appeared in the doorway, as though she had been on the watch. Instead of the black silk and sequins of her company dinner dress, the little lady was still in her afternoon attire.

"You're not dressed!" Virginia began, as soon as she was near enough to speak in a careful undertone. "Then I shan't be late after all."

There was no caution in Miss Creighton's answering voice, though her wistful eyes searched the girl's face anxiously.

"There's nothing to be late for, dear. The man who owns the yacht drove up an hour ago to say that he had decided to sail for Anticosti at daylight, and everyone must be on board to-night. As your father refused his invitation for you and himself—you're not disappointed, dear?"

"No, Marraine, I didn't want to go—but Lady Warrenden?"

"She thought she might as well go back with him. She was sorry not to say good-bye to you, and left all

sorts of messages. Louis hunted everywhere for you, dear."

"I fell asleep down on the beach. I'm sorry if it seemed rude—but father?"

The two avoided each other's eyes at the question and answer.

"He went down with them to call on some lady on board. He said not to wait dinner for him if he were late. He might have supper with Mr. Dorval."

Virginia gave a little sigh of relief. It seemed the best thing that could happen just then to be alone with that peacefully familiar presence.

"It's after seven now, so you'd better come in as you are. You must be tired, child."

"Yes, I'm tired. It's nice to be just by our two selves, Marraine," and as they entered the house, she drew her arm through the other's with an unwonted effusiveness.

"Yes, dear," was all Miss Creighton answered, but her eyes dimmed with unshed tears. Nothing more passed between them on the subject of their visitors; indeed, Virginia was unusually silent all the evening and went to bed early.

She was lying staring with sleepless eyes at the flickering streamers of northern lights seen through her window, when she heard her father come upstairs and pause by her half-open door.

"Awake, little girl?" he asked softly.

"Yes, father," she answered, stilling a tremor in her voice.

He did not come in, but spoke from where he stood:

"I dropped in to see Dorval on the way home. He's just had a wire from Noel, who had made a rush down to St. Maudez, to take out their rights, leaving Jack on

guard. Virginia Mine is all marked out he says, and is going to be a first-class affair."

The kindness of his voice, the relief of the tidings, swept over the girl like a great wave of light, scattering the day's shadows before it.

"Oh, how splendid!" she gasped.

"Yes, it's fine.

"Dorval and I are starting for Owl's Nest the first thing in the morning, before you're down, most likely. I want to plan that new dining-room and ice-house, and he feels like a holiday, so we'll be away over Sunday. Take care of yourself, child."

"Yes, father. Good-bye."

And soon, tired out by varied feelings, she was sleeping like a child, while Marcus Holbeach saw the stars pale before he closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SANDS RUN OUT

IT was a glorious noontide, with the first hint of autumn crispness in the rioting wind that set all the forest trees whispering and swaying.

Here and there down in the swamps a maple burned red, or on a rocky hillside the bracken had turned bronze. Otherwise, there was as yet no sign of the year's decay, though it had reached full fruition.

Up on the bare slope of a blueberry barren, where a few scattered gray skeleton trunks rising from the low bushes told of the fires that had swept these hills, a party of three sat picnicking on a group of rocks.

Mrs. LeRoy, her cotton dress girded high, her man's cap on the back of her head, sat enthroned on a rock before their little feast, while Virginia and Esther, perched on nearby boulders, were munching sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs with relish.

Virginia had awakened early to a restless fit. The night before she had gone to sleep contented enough, but morning had brought her new fears. Jack was standing guard alone. The words haunted her with a prevision of disaster.

She must see that telegram. There would be no difficulty about it, if only Dorval were at home, for she was used to run in and out of his office, with the freedom of a spoiled child.

But surely she would find more news at the pink cot-

tage. With the thought she remembered that to-day was that great event in Mrs. LeRoy's year, her annual blueberry picking. Since they were children, Esther and she had, as the season came around, taken their lunch-baskets and gone up to the barrens to help in the day's work. Great was their pride when the baskets were filled to overflowing. When Jack was a boy he was always of the party, and carried home the heaviest pail. Now, a stolid-faced, half-breed youth was pressed into the service.

The girls found Mrs. LeRoy awaiting them, her face alert with the spirit of vagabondage, while Czar, knowing what was ahead, sat in expectant dignity on the doorstep.

"Well, here I am, 'live and hearty on another blueberry day," was her greeting; "an' this day bein' a special celebration of Jack's good luck."

Virginia promptly demanded the telegram.

Yes, Mr. Dorval had sent it over to her last night, or rather this morning afore he went off, being one of those as never forgets anybody.

The girl studied the paper in silence, finding there just what her father had said.

Looking up, she met Esther's glance and offered the paper to her. "I've seen it. Mr. Dorval brought it in last evening," was her answer.

Then Mrs. LeRoy hustled them off to the business of the day. Now, after three hours' work, they were resting in friendly comradeship, while a row of full baskets told of their industry.

The sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs had been dispatched, and they had reached the crowning delicacy of the jam-puffs which Mrs. LeRoy always made for this festival.

"Well, 'twould do me good to think as Jack had one of my jam-puffs to-day," said his mother dreamily.

Esther laughed. "He always used to have the odd one over, don't you remember?"

"Not but what I'm sure he's got fine eatin', with that man Moses along. Most prospectors gets to be good cooks, off by themselves so much," went on Mrs. LeRoy with resolute optimism, pouring out another cup of cold coffee for Virginia. No fires were allowed up here, near the timber limits.

Virginia, perched on a flat rock, her fox-terrier beside her, Czar at her feet, was staring out over the sea of forested hills. Where they sat, the Basin and village were hidden from them, and they could see no sign of man's habitation to break the great sweep of woods.

"Esther," said Virginia abruptly, "what did Mr. Dorval think about the telegram?"

Esther looked up from peeling a banana.

"Why," with a touch of surprise, "he thought it splendid, of course."

"Yes, but what did he say about Jack being on guard?"

"Nothing, save that they wouldn't both want to leave."

"And did he think those other people likely to be about still?"

"He didn't say so."

"Oh, Esther, how tiresome you are! What *did* he say then?" Virginia demanded.

Esther laughed. She understood her friend's fears well enough, but she was not going to acknowledge that she did.

"Why, he said that there's no doubt you're all going to roll in riches," she said lightly.

A new thought came to Virginia.

"What a pity you're not in it, too," she said.

Esther hesitated before she answered:

"Mr. Dorval offered mother a share in his interest last night, and she refused."

Virginia read in the words the longing for larger horizons, a longing she herself had never known.

"But why?" she asked.

"I don't know. She has a horror of chances."

"Your ma's a wise woman," put in Mrs. LeRoy. "Many a man I've seen spendin' good money on mines, but never yet have I seen a man as was rich from one."

In both girls' present state of mind, this idea was heresy.

"But you can't help believing in this one," Esther protested.

"I'll believe in it when I see the money, not afore."

"But they know that the silver's there in quantities."

The old woman held firm.

"I'm not sayin' as it isn't there often enough, an' all the same that don't prevent it slippin' through their fingers. Look at Tom Clayton, as found the best asbestos mine in the Townships. He sold it for a song when he was drunk, put the money intil an ice-cream parlor an' lost it all. No," she went on with a shake of the head, "many a prospector as has found more nor one good mine in his day I've seen die a poor man, or else go off into the woods an' never be heard of again. I believe the Injuns is right, when they say there's Spirits in mines as calls back the riches from them as carries it off. You don't catch Injuns mining. They know better—they leave them alone." She sat staring down gloomily on the outspread sea of leafage. "Ah," she said, "the woods hides many a queer thing. They're dark an' tricky an' closes 'round you to your destruc-

tion. Give me the sea—that, if it fights you an' kills you, does it honest, out in the light o' day."

The girls had listened with sober faces. Both their hearts were in the woods, and her words sounded ill-omened. But Virginia's eyes, as they swept the hillsides, were full of dreamy fascination.

"Ah, I love the woods that shelter one like a big friendly house. Some day I'm going off to live in them always," she murmured, ending with a little smile to herself.

Esther jumped up, scattering egg-shells among the bushes. "Ah, no," she said. "I'll camp in them and tramp through them, but give me the open to live in. Like Mrs. LeRoy, I love the sea—that's the open path to everywhere. And now let's finish filling the other baskets."

It was three days later than this when, in the warm evening glow, Virginia, sitting alone on the veranda, saw Esther speeding up the garden path.

How quickly she came—a mysterious white figure in the dusk!

"Where's your hurry?" Virginia called.

Then, as no answer came, a cold fear gripped her, and she ran down the steps to meet her friend.

"Esther, why don't you speak?" she cried. "Oh, surely, there can't be bad news!"

Her fears had flown at once to the northern river, where Jack was alone.

Esther knew what she meant, and answered quick and low: "No, it's not that—but oh, Virginia, Mr. Dorval sent Sebastian down for you . . ."

"Father!" Virginia murmured in a dazed tone. She had never dreamed that trouble was to come from that quarter.

"Yes, he wants you. He is ill."

Through Esther's scant speech she read the deeper meaning.

"He's alive?" she breathed, just above a whisper.

"Yes, but—" she checked herself with a gasp, and there was no need of more. Virginia understood the need of haste, if she would satisfy her father's last wish.

Everything beside that one purpose seemed all at once vague and set at a distance from her. While she still stood grasping Esther's hand, Miss Creighton had limped out from the drawing-room, where she had been lying invalided with lumbago.

She heard her soft lament, heard Esther saying:

"Sebastian says it happened last evening. They fetched the doctor up this morning. It's a strain of the heart, but it seems he knew it must come soon. He had been warned."

Virginia shook her arm.

"Esther, I mustn't stay talking. We must get the buckboard at once."

"It's no use hurrying. The moon doesn't rise before one o'clock. You can't start up the river before that!"

The quiet statement broke down her courage and she cried wildly:

"I must! I must get there before he dies! Oh! If he should die alone!"

Miss Creighton drew her into her arms and soothed her silently, but with a new thought Virginia pulled herself away, demanding: "Where's Sebastian? I must see him."

"He's with Louis in the stable now. We called at his house as we came," Esther assured her, and she calmed at the thought that something was being done.

Then all became swift preparation. While Virginia

was flinging off her light dress, Miss Creighton stood beside her with her short red skirt and golf coat.

"No, not that," she said with a shiver away from the bright stuff. "The navy blue, that's darker," and the little woman obeyed her in silence.

"You poor Marraine," Virginia said, looking into the pale face. "Your back's bad, I know. You ought to be under your down quilt."

"But I want to go with you."

"You couldn't. You know you couldn't."

Miss Creighton did know it, but for once in her life, the little woman thought of herself and broke into an open wail:

"Oh, it is too hard, that I should have to fail you and him now."

Marcus Holbeach had for years loomed large in her not over-filled life, and his supreme need drew her like a magnet, apart from the motherly yearning over her charge, going out to face her first ordeal.

Virginia gave a quick gasp, to keep down the rising tide of sorrow.

"Marraine! You've never failed anyone yet! Oh, what's that!" as a slow, heavy step sounded on the stairs.

They turned, to see Mrs. LeRoy's great bulk in the doorway. She looked more massive than ever in a man's ulster and with a cloth cap tied on by a black gauze veil. Her heavy eyes told of a vigil of tears, but her face was set in impassiveness. She gave no greeting, uttered no words of sympathy, only made the bald statement:

"Mr. Dorval sent word as I'd better come along. There's canoes an' men in plenty, if I'd take up too much room in yours. I expect I can double myself up somehow."

And no one felt a doubt but that "somehow" Mrs. Le-

Roy would accomplish any purpose to which she set herself. There was some poor pretense at food, hot soup and cold meat before they started, but it was hard work not to choke over it. Any attempt at good-byes between Miss Creighton and Virginia would have been fatal to their hard-held self-control. Each was too vividly conscious of what the home-coming might mean.

It was with a gasp of relief that the girl snuggled down in the buckboard, close to the old woman's soft bulk. Against the velvety darkness of the sky flickered long red streamers of northern lights. Mrs. LeRoy muttered:

"The Injun Ghosts are on the trail."

Louis was in front, driving, with Sebastian beside him, and two canoemen followed in a light buggy. In spite of the lateness of the hour, as they drove down the village street, there were groups of men at open doors, waiting to see them pass. Half of Lanse Louise would have been on their way up the river if they might have given any help in his need, to the man who had dwelt among them so long, who had been good friend and neighbor to so many of them.

That dark drive, necessarily slow when they came to the steep hillside tracts, and the long river paddle by moonlit reaches and darkly shadowed pools, was ever afterwards a nightmare memory to Virginia.

Sebastian and the river guardian poled her canoe, while the two other rivermen followed with Mrs. LeRoy.

The ashen gray of dawn was changing to a wonder of auroral radiance, when Sebastian turned the canoe's head into the Owl's Nest Landing.

Her hungry eyes had already sought the camp on the height, but failed to detect any sign of overhanging catastrophe. A blue streak of smoke rose against the

saffron sky, as though an ordinary day were beginning within. Dorval was awaiting them at the landing, and the inevitable question came hoarse on Virginia's lips:

"He's alive?"

"Yes, and expecting you," and as the men steadied the canoe, he stooped to raise the stiffened girl. A glance into his worn face, and a silent head-shake, slew her last glimmer of hope.

She never quite knew how she got up the steep path. She realized little, until she found herself standing by a low camp bed on the veranda, with the glow of the coming sunrise weaving a strange glory around that face, so familiar, and yet so strange, with the new gray hollows and peaked outlines of two days' suffering. The eyes alone seemed to have concentrated all the remaining vital force, all the conquest of spirit over body. A gleam of attained purpose lit them, as Virginia crouched down and laid her hand on the wasted one, on which the bronze of outdoor life seemed already fading.

"Mrs. LeRoy brought you? . . . That's right." There was a gap between each phrase, and the girl's soul shivered at the strangeness of the voice.

His eyes passed on to the old woman, standing behind, and their insistence drew her forward.

"Tell Jack to take care of her—when I'm gone—Dorval knows—he'll tell him what I want," he said slowly and with great effort.

His eyes closed and, as the first great golden ray spread around him, Virginia breathed a wail of "Father—" thinking the end had come. Mrs. LeRoy's big hand on her shoulder soothed her.

"Hush, child! He ain't gone yet."

As if his daughter's voice had called him back, Holbeach's eyes opened, but they all saw that his conscious-

ness was failing. An inner light transfigured his face, and, gazing at Virginia, he said in a fuller, deeper voice:

"Amy—I did my best for the child—I've left her happy."

In childlike dismay at his aloofness, she cried again sharply:

"Father!"

The ghost of a laugh passed his blue lips.

"The child's calling me—I must go—good-bye, Amy."

Like a veil, a gray dimness spread over his face, and after a great silence, Mrs. LeRoy stooped and drew the shuddering girl up into her arms.

"Come away with me, my lamb," she murmured. "Your father's at rest."

Later, when Marcus Holbeach had been laid in his own room, they left Virginia alone beside him. The river and the pine trees sang the song he had loved, the reddening maple leaves sparkled in the sunshine, and in that inscrutable smile of death, the great peace of the world he had loved so well, seemed emphasized.

Watching that strange return of youthful beauty to the dead face, the girl forgot her loss in a new sense of union. All those unworthy years and people were far from him now. He had gone to her mother, his last words were for her, and in the going, he belonged to her more utterly than ever in life. At noon, Dorval led her down to the shore, and in the mid-day glow she floated down the river.

It was dusk before Marcus Holbeach was brought back to his home, Dorval close beside him, the men from every cottage they passed falling in behind the little procession.

In the dead man's life there had been many errors and

weaknesses, but he had been loved as better men have often failed to be.

Full of this sense of reunion with her father, Virginia's grief was without bitterness. Her face looked pinched, and her eyes big and dark, as she went about the silent house and garden, picking armfuls of white flowers for that darkened room.

And then Marcus Holbeach was laid to rest in the little English churchyard, between the hills and the water, and the life of those who had cared for him went on again without him.

Virginia was the principal thought to them all—Miss Creighton and Dorval, Esther and Mrs. LeRoy. She took their kindness very gently and sweetly, not shrinking away into solitude. It was on the day after the funeral that Dorval drew her off to a garden-seat to tell her of those last days' talks with her father.

Somehow, even before the fatal seizure, he had seemed to know that the end was near, and to dwell on the thought that he was not leaving his daughter alone.

"I wanted to give her the English home, but it didn't work—never could have. She had more sense than I had," he said.

Dorval had long known of the will, leaving Virginia the Bluff House and half his available English property, while the other half went to Giles. But on the last active day of Holbeach's life there had been a codicil, drawn up and signed, dividing the money he had arranged to invest in the Virginia mine, between her and Jack LeRoy, "so that he can have a standing of his own when he marries her." Dorval and Miss Creighton were Virginia's trustees and guardians.

The girl's tears fell fast at these signs of loving

thoughtfulness, but they were tears without a sting in them.

All at once she looked up at Dorval, with a sudden intentness, asking: "But when will Jack hear?"

Dorval shook his head. "I'm afraid we must wait for that," he said. And they did wait without a word, while the glory of the forests waxed and waned, and the autumn storms rolled up the Gulf, and Virginia's eyes grew more wistful and shadowy.

CHAPTER XXVII

VIRGINIA CAMP

LITTLE did Jack LeRoy guess during those autumn days, of the changes that had come to Lanse Louise, or that he himself, by right of his legacy, was now the largest shareholder in the Virginia mine. Much was to happen before he knew that in death Marcus Holbeach had acknowledged his claim to his daughter.

Though the consciousness of Virginia as a motive power to every action was always with him, Jack, being by no means an imaginative person, did not give much thought to what might be happening in Lanse Louise. His present business was to get the mine started, and into that he put all his heart.

It was the golden time, when summer had merged into the first mellow glow of autumn, and over silent forests and river brooded the peace of maturity. As his friend's canoe vanished downstream, Jack strolled back to the empty camp that seemed all at once to have lost its old homelike feeling. A good fire and a comrade to share it can make a home in queer places, and comrades these two had grown in many a yarn over pipes, when the day's work was done. The hopes they shared, the respect they had learned for each other's loyalty, had knit a strong bond between them.

But now, with large stores of unconscious philosophy

to draw on, and with the future rosy ahead, Jack settled himself to make the best of his solitude.

Noel had shown him where the first work of clearing should be started, and, as one beginning a solemn ritual, he struck the first blow with his ax.

It meant so much to him, this work—meant the home he was to make for Virginia, and all the coming happy years, when he would know the respect of Holbeach and Dorval, would insure his mother's comfort and taste the sweets of success.

But there were other things to bear in mind beside the work on his beloved domain. He was here single-handed, and that party of five men, who knew of his treasure, and would miss no chance to grab it, were not far off and might appear at any time. With all the coolness of an unimaginative nature, he took his precautions.

To one side of the camp rose a steep ledge of granite, clothed with bushes wherever there had been space for soil to settle in its cracks. This ledge he explored, and finding its crest slope inward to one of those hilltop springs whose waters never fail, he carried up there a certain share of his stores.

To this ledge he climbed twice a day to scan the downstream length of the lake, with the glasses that had been Dorval's present to him. It was from downstream that either friend or foe would come.

On a radiant September noon, when the lake slept under the pale blue sky, he clambered up there before cooking his dinner. He felt that *someone* must come to-day.

And someone *did* seem to be coming, for what else was that black speck down the island, and that rhythmic flash of wet paddle-blades in sunshine? With the instinctive caution of the forest, he dropped to crouch on

the rock and gazed. If the canoe were to hold on upstream, it might be carrying Indians or lumbermen, for this string of lakes threaded on a river was one of the great northern waterways. If there were only two men, they might be Moses and Pierre. No, there were three. He could see that plainly. Now remained the chance of their holding on upstream. They were level with the landing, they were past it, and his heart had given a leap of relief when, with the skilled touch of practiced rivermen, the canoe swept round and dropped down to the bank.

He had already recognized Coolen, who was guiding his party to their old camp. Beside him he saw one of the American engineers, who had been in Coolen's company at Gowganda, and a tough-looking specimen of the local riverman.

In the impulse to hold his ground, he slipped down the ledge to the camp, and, with a grim chuckle, sat himself down, facing the shore path, with the fire in front of him, and the pole bearing their names, and the title of the Virginia Mining Company, behind him.

Although in those waiting moments he reached out for the frying-pan and began to slice bacon into it, his revolver was ready under his wrist.

His practiced ear heard the grate of gravel on the beach, heard the swish of parted bushes, before Coolen appeared in the path, staring at him with a blank amazement, that changed to a brutish scowl of dismay. Over his shoulder Jack saw the peering face of the engineer.

"The devil!" came in a gasp from Coolen.

Returning the stare with interest, and seeming to see no one save Coolen, Jack asked blandly:

"Well, my friend, and what brings *you* here? I thought I had seen the the last of you."

This let loose a volley of profanity.

"Guess you haven't, then, by a long sight, Mr. Leader of Better Men than Yourself. If you want to know so bad, I've brought me partners here to the claim as I took up three months ago, and as you've jumped like the—all sorts of unpleasant things—you are."

"That's a lie, anyhow," came sharp and short from Jack. "I'll take my oath you've not seen this place since the night we camped here and found the skull lying on the rock, and you and your sort stampeded half a mile, because one of the Frenchies had the nightmare, and yelled like a screech-owl. I wonder you're not too scared of the skull to come back."

At the contemptuous words, the undersized creature poked his long neck forward like a snake about to bite.

"It would take more'n any old skull, nor you either, to scare me, so if you think you're going to jump my claim . . ." he shrilled.

"Shut up, Coolen," came over his shoulder from the engineer. "There's no sense in starting a fight." Then to Jack: "Your name's LeRoy, ain't it?"

"It is."

"And you consider yourself in possession here?"

"I do, most certainly."

"Well, it's a sell for us. We hadn't an idea there was anyone else in the field. We didn't even see a canoe on the bank."

The words were conciliatory, but as Jack met those watchful eyes he felt it wise not to betray the fact that he had no means of escape at hand.

"I mostly like to hide my canoe in the bushes. Sometimes folks lose them."

He knew the rashness of the taunt, as he marked the flash of cold anger in the engineer's eyes.

A howl came from Coolen.

"It was *you,* you skunk . . ."

"I told you to shut up, Coolen," said the engineer.

"Then you're working single-handed?" he asked, his intent stare on Jack.

Again the latter felt that the truth might not be wise.

"I expect my partner along the first thing in the morning," was his jaunty answer.

"By the first train, I guess," the other sneered; then to Coolen: "look here, we'd better see to our canoe."

There seemed to Jack some significance in the tone, and that one man could have done the job.

He sat waiting, and in a minute the two were back, the engineer leading this time.

"Well," he said, strolling forward with a casual air, "as we've only one canoe to five of us just now, I guess I'll have to make a trip downstream again. It will be best to leave the men here to make a camp, while I fetch up the other two. We may not be back before the morning, so p'rhaps we'll have the pleasure of meeting your partner on the way."

The casualness was a bit overdone, and Jack, sitting facing the speaker, with the same steady gaze, felt a strange stirring at the roots of his hair, as he realized that this move had been planned just now between them. Why was the responsible man of the party going off and leaving him, one against two, through the hours of darkness, with these two wolves of the forest? How did he expect to find the situation changed when he returned next day?

Revealing none of these doubts, he rapped out: "They're not going to make a camp here on our land."

The other grinned queerly.

"No? You're very particular. Well, then, they'll

camp—let me see—at the long point by the narrows. You've no objection to that?"

"No." This was hardly the truth, but still, what else could he say? "All right, then." The engineer turned to go, saying as he did so: "See you—perhaps to-morrow, perhaps . . ."

"In Kingdom Come," put in Jack—and then reviled himself for having, even to that extent, betrayed his suspicions.

"Dear me! I hope before that!" And his little cackling laugh was the last Jack heard from him.

He waited until their voices had died away, and then peered after them from the shore. Yes, they had gone downstream, but he felt that the two men would not be far away. For all they could tell, it was his life alone that stood between them and riches. He knew Coolen as an unmitigated blackguard, and the one glimpse obtained of his companion had revealed him as the lowest type of half-breed. Truly the coming hours of darkness were likely to hold quite as much excitement as he hankered after. If things were in a normal state surely it would have been more natural for the engineer to stay and prospect the new ground, keeping Coolen to make the camp, while he sent the other man downstream.

Fervently Jack wished that he had taken to his eyrie at the first alarm, but now he felt that he must hold the fort, giving no sign of weakness. Some instinct seemed to make the camp fire the central point of possession, and there he stayed.

The hours of enforced idleness were passed in whittling points to a heap of poles, and as his knife worked, his mind scanned all the chances of the near future. He meant to leave no loop-hole open to failure, if he could help it.

The early sunset came, and with it a new sense of the encompassing forest solitude.

He started at a distant cry, and looked up to see overhead a wedge-shaped flock of wild geese heading south,—the first sign of the coming winter. It was a relief to inaction to have a shot at them, and as two birds fell near by, he plucked one and began to prepare it for supper.

"Enough left for guests, if they happen along," he muttered, when he had done his best on it.

At last came the hour when the night must be faced. He would not keep up a bright fire to guide his foes, but before banking the brands he flung on a handful of dry leaves, and in their light took a long look at Virginia's face. Was she thinking of him to-night, he wondered, whispering, "God bless her!" as he stowed the little case away, close to his heart.

And then began his night watch. Used to his eight hours' sleep, he did his best, tramping the narrow cleared space of the camp, sitting up with hands clasping his knees, and smoking all the time.

It was little after midnight when his head dropped forward on his clasped hands and he dozed, to start all at once keenly alert at the crack of a stepped-on twig. Yes, there it was again, through the night stillness, the swish of parting bushes coming nearer. There was no time to think. *His* move must be made before the others stopped to listen.

Leaving his blanket in place, he crawled from under it, toward the cliff. He reached a lower jutting ledge and swung himself up just as the flickering glow of the aurora overhead showed a dark figure creep into the open space around the fire and stoop over his bed.

"There'll be a hole in my new blanket," he jested wrath-

fully to himself, just as he heard Coolen's voice, hoarse with rage: "He's given us the slip!"

Behind him came the grunt of the half-breed: "Him gone in canoe. No catch him."

"Don't believe he's got a canoe to his name. We're bound to catch him now. The boss doesn't mean to know what's become of him. He'll ask no questions, an' the lake's deep."

"Thank you!" muttered Jack, with new sense of the preciousness of life, a new power to fight for it.

It was a matter of life and death now to scale the cliff without a betraying sound.

As they stirred the brands and, heaping on brushwood, proceeded to rummage the camp, Jack slowly crept upward and reached his cuplike fortress in silence.

"They'll try nothing now till daylight," he decided, and then, in ten minutes, was sound asleep.

Starting up with the earliest dawn, he realized his position. It might have been worse, he decided. He had water, food and a blanket, and, even if discovered, could hold his position with a revolver, while there was every chance of speedy reinforcements.

"If I weren't such a chap to sleep," he pondered ruefully.

The long hours passed, and, though he might not smoke, he could eat his cold bacon and biscuits, flavoring them with blueberries from the low bushes around, all the time keeping a sharp ear for the occasional movements of the men through the brushwood.

Hour by hour he scanned the long sweep of the lake and found it empty, but at last, as the sun was sinking toward the crimson hills, his heart leaped at sight of a canoe with two men in it, below the island.

On it came steadily, and at last he felt sure of Moses'

queer fashion of paddling, a fashion he had many a time laughed at.

For a moment he pondered as to letting them land unwarned, and making a rush down to join them. No, the others might have got reckless enough to shoot at them from shelter, and lives might be lost.

In the enforced idleness of last winter's camps, Jack had invented a system of signaling to amuse the men, and Moses had been an enthusiast at it. Deciding to risk the others seeing him, he tied a red handkerchief to a stick and began. For a time there was no response, then, yes, there was a flicker of red, and Jack felt sure that Moses had understood his order to go ashore and lie low till dark.

The canoe faltered, and, turning in to the bank, was lost to sight. There was none of last night's desolation in the clear yellow sunset and its presage of night, for friends were at hand and he could wait, but it was enough to put any man in a temper to sniff the savory fumes that rose from his camp and to know that the foes were there busy cooking his second goose for their supper. He had grabbed the half-eaten one as he fled, and was feeding on it now, but there is a wide difference between hot and cold goose, as he bitterly realized.

"Why wasn't I content with one?" he wondered.

His supper finished, he crouched with his head over the ledge to listen to the enemy's talk.

Coolen seemed to be sitting just below him, with his back turned. A weird cry from a loon thrilled the air, and Coolen looked around uneasily.

"I don't like this place, never did, since the first day I saw it, with that white skull grinning at us from that rock over there. How'd it get there, an' what did Alphone see when he started screechin' an' runnin' that night? His mother was a witch down the Long Water.

There's something queer about the place, and if I didn't believe that skunk's hidin' 'round waitin' to get back, an' if the camp wasn't fixed up so snug, I'd just . . ."

He never said what he would do, for, as he talked, Jack had been watching the approach of a weird figure through the bushes.

Swathed in white folds, with head and claws of a wildcat dangling over a face streaked with black and white ashes, it bore a semblance to an Indian chief of old in his battle paint.

As the ghastly thing parted the bushes and slid forward with a noiseless step, it brandished a hatchet and gave a long, wailing cry, seeming ready to swoop on the camp and its occupants. With that, Jack, seeing the toe of a familiar boot below the blanket, and knowing that Moses was on the war-path, sent out from his crag an Indian war-whoop that he had spent many boyish hours in perfecting.

But his help was not needed. One glance at that awesome form, with the forest darkness behind it and the firelight playing fantastically over its barred face, was enough for the two, who fled with yells and oaths befitting Lutzau's Wild Chase.

As their cries died away, the ghost flung down his sailcloth wrapping, a weirder figure than ever, with painted face and feathered crest matching so ill the miner's dress below.

A Homeric peal of laughter rang out from Jack's fortress, and Moses peered anxiously round.

"Where are ye, then? Come on quick with your gun if you're not tied," he shouted.

"*I'm* not tied. No fear."

Slipping and sliding down the rock, Jack tumbled head first into camp, and the two grasped hands.

"Good for you, old Boanerges!" was his greeting. "Where's Pierre?"

"Keeping an eye on the canoe."

"We'll pack it up here, then we'll fall to on the goose Mr. Coolen's been cooking while I was perched on the rock sniffing it. But how'd you guess that an Indian ghost would come in handy?"

Moses chuckled. "Lord bless you, I hadn't forgotten that outrageous night we camped here, an' when I saw you on the hill-top an' their smoke in the camp, I knew 'twas time to be doing. Not to mention," he went on with a smirk, "that I was doin' a bit of prospectin' of me own round the bosses' camp. They're right out on that narrow point, an' I crept up an' heard enough to make us get a way on. I heard one of them joking about Coolen's ghost. Guess they won't joke to-morrow. Tell you what, sor," he added seriously, "you've had your own good luck to have kept clear of them two, for they do be tellin' me down below as the men they've got with them are the very scum of the river."

"See here," was Jack's answer, as he held up his new blanket, scarred by a deep knife-thrust. "That was meant for me," he said.

There was mighty feasting that night on the rescued goose, and Jack had the first turn at sleep while Moses kept watch.

Jack felt sure the engineers would allow no open fighting, but that was not to say that Coolen might not try some shooting on his own account.

They would not be quite secure from meddling until the others knew that their claim was registered.

And so, for the next few days, while they tasted the first joys of their work, they kept one man on guard. Moses, prowling round in the twilight in the canoe, re-

ported that the other party had come up and camped on the opposite shore behind the island.

"I guess Coolen saw me fetchin' some stones from behint there one day, but they weren't no good," he explained.

"Well, I wish they'd clear out," said Jack, who had heard a shot whizz close to him, as he stooped to wash some fish in the stream that morning.

At last came the noontide when, as they smoked their after-dinner pipes by the fire, they heard a long, clear whistle from the lake.

"Noel!" cried Jack, and they all tumbled down to the shore, to see the canoe just running in to the bank, Noel in the stern and a Frenchman in the bow.

"You've got the claim?" asked Jack.

"That's all right. But who are your neighbors across the way?"

"It's a long story. Come on and have grub," said Jack.

Jack's tale was told over the pipes, and Noel's bronzed face looked more like a carved wooden image than ever as he listened.

"We'll soon settle them," he decided. "It won't be worth their while to make any more trouble when once they know we've got our claim registered. Those engineers can't want to make the country too hot to hold them."

"I guess Coolen's a bit out of hand. That last shot of his must have been a private speculation," said Jack, who had a weakness for judging his fellows leniently. "And so," he went on, "you and I'll paddle over presently and explain matters."

But Noel looked dubious. "See here," he began, "you seem to be a red flag to a bull to the lot of them, while if Louis and I just happened along it would take them

a minute or two to make out who we were, and those minutes are just what we want."

Jack argued the point, but Moses and Noel together were too strong for him, and an hour later the latter set out across the lake with his man.

"I'm going to wave a white flag at them in case of accidents," Noel explained as he went.

The rival camp was pitched on an open bank, and Noel's shout brought two or three men to stare at the eccentric person who sat gently waving a white handkerchief on a stick.

"The boss there?" he began.

"I'm boss," answered a short, spare man, "but I'm not a mosquito for you to be flapping that thing at me."

"I just wanted to prevent any one shooting at rabbits while I'm round. I'm nervous about fire-arms," Noel drawled. "See here, I understand a man of yours claims first rights to our mine over there."

"*Your* mine?"

"Yes; I'm Noel, one of the partners in the Virginia Mine, and I've just come across in a friendly way to say we've got our boundaries marked out and registered and it's no use kicking."

There was something like a growl from the group on the bank, and Noel sat with his eyes fixed for any hostile sign.

But it was evident that times were changed.

"That so?" was the dreary response. "Well, God knows, I'd never have come wasting time and money here if I'd have guessed some one was ahead of me."

"Why don't you get on upstream? There's lots more chances round everywhere," Noel found himself reassuring the speaker.

"How can we, five men to one canoe?"

"Well, as I came up yesterday I saw the nose of a dug-out sticking out of the shallow water just below the first run. Perhaps it's yours. So long! *Bon voyage!*" And with a swift paddle-stroke he was out in mid-stream, for fear their feelings might prove too much for them.

The next day there was no smoke on the opposite shore, and Pierre, scouting, pronounced the coast clear. Then ensued a time of hard work, sweetened by the daily solidifying of golden visions. Before the first storm had bared the hills of their leafy glory, the owners of Virginia mine knew that they were to be richer than they had ever dreamed.

"The lake's caught," said Noel, one crisp morning. "Till the going's hard there'll be no use for any of us to make excuses to go down."

Jack looked guilty. "Well, *someone* will have to go then to see about machinery and men, and all sorts of things. This mine's going to be a big thing."

There was a look of almost awe on his face at the realization of his dreams.

"Then *you* can go," said Noel. "It will be my turn later. And, see here, while you're away we'll build you a fine house."

"A fine house?" Jack turned a bewildered gaze on the spacious log-hut the two shared, and which had been his pride when finished. "Why, isn't this good enough?"

"It won't always be."

Suddenly Jack flushed scarlet.

"Noel," he cried in boyish appeal, "you don't think I could bring her here?"

"Why not, if she's the right sort and if you've got the money to do it. *I* mean to try it in the spring."

"Hurrah!" Jack shouted. "We'll found a colony."

CHAPTER XXVIII

RESTITUTION

IT WAS winter again in Lanse Louise, and while, at the Bluff House, Virginia in her black dress waited and watched for news that was slow to come, at the hotel the shadows were deepening.

Coming and going between the two houses, Esther never entered her own home without feeling the gloom wafted out like something palpable to meet her.

She could not have told by what exact process she had arrived at the certainty of some secret tie, either past or present, between her mother and Dorval.

Perhaps a hundred little half-noticed facts of years had taken adhesive shape that summer night when Noel and she had come upon the two on the veranda; perhaps she had learned to read the meaning of her father's furtive glances, of her mother's welcoming eyes. Nothing was openly changed in their home life. Dorval came and went with the same careless regularity, playing chess with her father in the evenings, bringing her mother books and papers and game from his shooting trips.

Once or twice of late, when he offered to take her for one of the long winter drives that had always been a habit with them, Esther had made an excuse, and then felt choky and guilty under his quick scrutiny.

It was no use; she could not dislike him. Everything about his looks and ways was so pleasant to her. She even wondered, now that she knew her own heart so well,

how she had never happened to fall in love with the only unmarried man whom she had really known, at least before Noel came.

It was in Mrs. Sabine that the change was concentrated. Day by day she went about her household tasks as though driven by an inward spirit of unrest, and when it seemed as though, in the winter quiet of the house, there could be nothing else for her to do, she produced great piles of linen and darned and stitched with the intensity which the captive hawk, Mary Stuart, must have put into those endless tapestries she left behind her in British fortress castles.

The only time she seemed to take any relaxation was when she sat and scanned the Boston and Montreal papers that, at this time of year, sometimes did not come for two or three days at a time, and then arrived all together. With these irregularities in the mails, Esther noticed a more somber light in her mother's eyes, an eagerness to open the delayed papers, while, as they crackled under her grasp, Mr. Sabine, shivering over the fire, watched her furtively. But for the certainty that her father was more at ease when she was near him, Esther would have taken every chance to be away from home. As it was, she renewed their old winter routine with Virginia, often driving for hours in her friend's light sleigh, or tramping the country together on snowshoes.

At the end of a still, gray day of intense frost, when earth and sky seemed grimly awaiting a snowfall, Esther had come in from such a drive, and paused a moment in the outer office to glance over one or two envelopes brought from the post-office. Seeing nothing of interest among them, she flung down her fur coat and was about to go on into the family sitting-room, when, through the door, a crack ajar, she heard her mother's voice, not

raised above its usual level tones, but strained in an intensity of bitterness:

"In all these long years has the need of restitution never conquered your craven fears? Even now, when I tell you that Mr. Noel is certainly dying, does it make no difference?"

Without a thought save for her own threatened happiness, Esther flung the door wide.

Mr. Sabine was huddled in his chair by the fire, looking up with nervous fear in his bright blue eyes at his wife, who stood before him, newspaper in hand.

"Mother, what do you mean? Who told you Mr. Noel is ill?"

Even in her anxious haste she could not use the ominous word.

Father and mother stared at her as at some frivolous interruption.

"What do *you* know of Mr. Noel?" Mrs. Sabine asked.

"Why, mother," impatiently, "you know, he was here in the house for a month——"

"And what would it matter to you if he died?"

Unheeding the harshness of the words, she protested:

"Everything! But you *must* tell me——"

Here her father's weak, shrill voice broke in in unwonted protest:

"Torture me if you want to, but not the child! She's not speaking of young Noel, Esther, but of his father. Come here to me, dear. Never mind what she said."

As Esther crouched by him, sobbing, the feeble old man put over her the protective arm of her childhood.

"But she said 'make restitution,'" she urged, wrought upon by mingled relief and fears.

"Hush, dear. Never mind what she said!" he feebly soothed her.

"She must mind." The words came heavy with fate from Mrs. Sabine, standing there, the paper in her hand.

"You wouldn't tell her, after all these years?"

The heartsick protest was unheeded. As though moving under the force of relentless fate, her mother spoke in slow, even tones:

"Yes; let her learn why Cyrus Noel's son will never marry her, when he knows who she is. Let her bear her share of the burden. I have borne mine long enough."

With a new dignity, Mr. Sabine lifted his thin white hand.

"And what of mine? I shall tell her myself. Sit there and listen if you like."

"No; I will leave you alone. I shall soon know if you have told her falsely."

Esther had shrunk aghast at this open display of long-nourished wrongs, of latent hatreds, but at this last taunt her protective care for her father broke out:

"Mother, how can you be so cruel!"

Mrs. Sabine scrutinized her without apparent resentment, almost as though she were weighing the staying powers of this new entrance on the lists.

"You will soon know what has made me cruel," she said gently, and went away.

Then, slowly, but without long hesitation, like one rehearsing an oft-conned tale, Mr. Sabine told his life's story to his daughter. His fragile hand shaded his eyes, and she never once raised her head to look into his face, but sat beside him on the floor, her hand grasping his that lay upon her shoulder.

A youth of careless ease, with artistic tastes, an inherited sleeping partnership in the family firm of which Cyrus Noel had gradually become the ruling spirit.

Marriage with a brilliant society girl, and years abroad to cultivate her voice; a return home on the eve of a panic that swept the country; a bewildered attempt to understand a complicated business; a quarrel with Joseph Noel, who, with unabashed cynicism, revealed years of fraud, from the results of which he had sheltered himself, leaving the firm to bear the blame. In frenzied panic Mr. Sabine made no effort to clear himself, but really believing himself to be as guilty as he seemed, if only through carelessness, fled with wife and children to the wilderness.

"Your mother was splendid," he told his child, with an innate loyalty that brought the tears to her eyes. "I never could have done it without her. You mustn't think her hard. Esther, she never was hard until the two children died, and——"

"And she knew Mr. Dorval," Esther mentally filled in the blank, though nothing was said.

"And our name is really Converse?" she asked, old memories awakening.

"Yes. Who told you?" with quickened fear.

"No one. I always knew, I think—I suppose I remembered. But, father——"

"Yes, child."

"She said 'make restitution'?"

He had hoped the bitter draught of shame was swallowed to the dregs, but now she felt the nervous start of the arm on her shoulder, and there was a quaver of utter misery in his weak voice.

"There were bonds I could lay my hands on quickly. They were really hers, but when we got here and she knew I had them, your mother thought I ought to return them. I would have—to content her—but how could I without betraying our hiding-place—and I was ill—it

"'Father! Father!' she murmured."

would be hard to die in prison——" His voice trailed off into silence, and Esther drew the poor shaking arm closer down around her neck.

"Father! Father!" she murmured pitifully.

It was like a rending of soul and body, that passion of sympathy for the hapless pair. She realized now the years-long martyrdom of her mother's proud integrity in its protest against fate; her daily toil and self-denial toward a fund of repayment; her gradual turning from weakness to strength. She realized her mother's suffering, and yet the warmth of her heart went out toward that poor, weak father, who had sat helpless to watch home love and respect go the way of all the rest. He had had *her;* thank God, he had her always. Thank God, she had never failed him.

There was no time yet to think of her own fortunes. That must come later, though somehow, as a background to this tragedy, deep in her sensible heart, she knew that not for any father's errors or mistakes would Eustace Noel give up making her his wife. He and she were too healthily normal and modern ever to torment themselves with visions of renunciation.

With what words she soothed and comforted her father in that hour of self-revelation, she never could afterward have told, but presently it was almost with a sense of surprise that, leaning up close to him, she heard herself saying softly:

"But mother was right. The bonds ought to be sent back."

"And you turn against me, too?" and he made a feeble motion to push her away, but she would not yield.

"No, father, it's because I know you never meant any harm that I want to prove it to—everyone. Let me take them back. I won't let a soul guess where I came from.

I'll just tell the whole story and then vanish. Who could harm me?"

She felt him shiver with the long-nourished dread.

"You don't know him—a cruel man. He never forgets. He'd have you followed, perhaps arrested——"

Still she persisted.

"I'm not afraid, father. It's the only way."

He turned his appealing eyes on her then.

"The only way to make you happy again, to make you forgive me?" he quavered.

"Father, dear, don't you know I care for you too much, understand you too well, for any need of forgiveness between us. But don't you see how it would comfort mother?"

She felt the thinness of the ice she trod on, but her steady purpose drove her forward.

His hand was over his eyes again.

"She would always despise me," he murmured. Then, with a flash of the old loyalty: "Oh, I shouldn't blame her. Life was too hard on her when she lost her two boys—such sturdy, bright little chaps——" He dropped into silence. Then, the ghost of his manhood showing itself in a new courage: "Go and tell her I am willing for you to go."

Esther obeyed him in an awed silence.

She found her mother in her room, sitting with her hands idly folded, gazing out on the bleak monotone of a white-and-black world. Even the tall spruce trees had no color in their darkness. Years after, Esther could see that slim figure outlined against the outer grayness, and feel the heart-chill of that winter day.

One glance told that the mantle of self-repression had been drawn around her, but, all the same, Esther poured out her tale without leaving herself time to hesitate.

"So he would do it for you," was the only comment.

"No. It's for *you* he does it, mother," Esther protested, drawn nearer to her mother by that trace of feeling. Still Mrs. Sabine stared through the window. Was she looking for some one, Esther suddenly wondered, with a fresh chill.

"We're crazy," Mrs. Sabine said abruptly. "We're forgetting all about the cold and the chance of storm."

To Esther these familiar facts seemed the smallest of things. She dreaded inexpressibly her journey's end and its contact with the big outside world, but its beginning had no fears for her.

"Why, the drive through to Dalhousie is nothing," she said, relieved to have reached the point of discussing details.

"Well, I can't have you do it alone."

The protest was almost a consent, and Esther treated it as such.

"No, of course not. Hector Mersin will be going tomorrow; he can easily take me. I'll go and find him before it gets dark."

"Very well," her mother agreed. Then, as Esther was turning away: "Wait a minute. There are my savings to send, too. It's not much—five thousand dollars—but I've always meant it to go with the bonds. Mr. Dorval has it. I'll give you a note, and you can go to him now."

Feeling to her inmost being the effort underlying the brusque words, Esther waited in silence until Mrs. Sabine had, with her quick deliberateness, written and closed the note, then she turned away without a word.

Had her father guessed, she wondered in helpless pain, that his wife had given her savings into another man's care, to guard from him?

It was a relief to be out in the still, cold air. Could it

be only an hour since Virginia had left her at the door? It seemed like days.

A lurid yellow light had spread, with sunset, over the gray sky, and with the second habit of those used to studying the daily weather signs that mean so much to them, Esther, even in her absorption, noted the nearness and distinctness in outline of the peninsula hills, noted the sickly yellow of the western light. Everything clearly warned her of a coming storm, but even while recognizing the obstacle, she was past caring for it. No storm should stop her, she determined.

She had not far to go, for, nearing Dorval's gate, she saw him coming up the road, and stopped to wait for him. He was dressed for tramping, though he carried no snowshoes on his back and wore a Norfolk jacket, bulky over a sweater, with moccasins, and long stockings pulled up to his knees. The dress gave him an air of youthful activity, as he swung along with the lightness of unshod feet. What a contrast to her poor father in there by the fire, Esther thought, and then shrunk back from the disloyalty of the comparison.

"Where are you off to?" he greeted her, a quiet satisfaction in his face.

"I was waiting for you. Mother sent you this note."

She thought her words were simply matter-of-fact, but there must have been something in them or in her voice to cause his quick glance of inspection.

"It's too cold for you to stand here. Will you come up to the house, or shall I go in with you?" was all he said.

"I'll go up with you," she decided promptly. Her one thought was to protect her father from his entrance in the old familiar fashion just now.

"All right."

Again that quick glance, and then, as he followed her

up the narrow, shoveled board-path to the house, he scanned the note.

Why, as they went, did Esther remember an overheard gossip of which the argument was, "there must be some reason for so rich a man as Mr. Dorval staying on in Lanse Louise"?

She had constantly been in and out of his house on errands to his housekeeper, or to some of the little festivities he gave to his boy apprentices, and the orderly comfort of his private sanctum was no new thing to her. To-night, however, it struck her with a new sense of contrast with the shabby austerity of her home sitting-room, an austerity that within the last hour had taken a new meaning in her eyes.

Instead of the ordinary white Quebec stove, brass andirons supported the weight of glowing logs on the open hearth.

From a big brown bear-skin, Dorval's old black-and-white setter, Meg, rose to greet him with gentle dignity, and his deep armchair before the fire, with the low table beside it heaped with papers and magazines and smoking things, told of the coming evening's comfort. A shaded lamp was already lit, and red curtains drawn over the windows.

"Sit down there and I'll get your chocolates. There's no hurry, I suppose?"

From childhood Esther had always been served from a special supply of French chocolates when she came to the house, but now she shook her head.

"Yes, there is," she said, still standing. "I'm going to Boston to-morrow on business for father, and I must hurry home."

Quietly as she made the statement, she could not but feel that he must recognize its significance.

He leaned against the mantelpiece and studied her for a quiet moment, and she proudly set her face to indifference under the scrutiny of the dark gray eyes beneath their long black lashes, though the familiar friendliness sorely tried her composure.

"To Boston!" he said slowly. "Well, and how are you going to get to Boston, or rather to Dalhousie?"

"I'm off now to see if Hector Mersin can take me with him in the mail to-morrow morning."

"It's going to storm."

"Yes, I know."

"And you *must* go?"

"Yes."

"And it's for that your mother wants the money?"

"Yes."

Through these answers there sounded an unfamiliar sense of defiance, instead of the old friendly dependence of years, but, if he felt it, he took no notice.

He stooped and kicked the logs together with his foot, and, as she watched the inscrutable face in the firelight, strange fancies surged through her brain. She would hardly have been surprised in that moment if he had turned to reveal to her that youth had stepped into the place of maturity, that she, not her mother, was now the motive power of his days.

"See here, Esther," he said suddenly. "You can't go like that, in this weather. Why not wait a day or two till the moon changes?"

"I can't. I must go," she gasped, every nerve strung up to immediate action.

"Very well. If you must——" he agreed philosophically. "For the last week or so, I've been planning a trip to New York or further south, and I might as well come along with you now. My ponies will take us through a

good sight quicker than Hector Mersin's horses can, and the sleigh's more comfortable——"

For a moment, as they faced each other, those insurgent fancies held her speechless with a strange dread. Then the compelling gray eyes aroused, almost in spite of herself, the loyal trust of years in the tried comradeship that had never failed her. Was he doing it for her mother, or was he doing it for her? She did not care. He was Mr. Dorval, who had always been her friend and mainstay, who would, more than ever, be it now.

For the first time that day, tears brimmed her eyes.

"How good in you!" she murmured. "Now I shan't mind anything."

At her words, the straight line of his black brows relaxed.

"And there's nothing else you want seen to before you go?" he asked casually enough, to clear the air of its emotional weight.

"No, thanks." Then, with a start: "Oh, yes, the money——"

"That will be all right. Tell your mother I'll see that you get the check in Boston."

He was opening the door for her now, and from the warmth and light she went out into the intense cold of the twilight. The yellow glow was lost in a universal grayness, against which the hotel lights already outlined orange squares.

All at once Esther realized what those orange lights meant to her—home, the one spot on God's earth where she belonged.

The mere fact of the outside cold and coming storm made the warmth and shelter of home seem at that moment something infinitely precious to her, but, giving

the gathering sense of forlornness no time to lay hold upon her, she hurried back.

The next morning, as she and Dorval, both muffled in furs, drove off from the hotel door, the first few scattered flakes were already falling. He had not left his seat in the sleigh, and Mrs. Sabine merely appeared, wraith-like, at the open door and called a "Good-bye" after Esther before closing it.

"There's no wind," he said, with an attempt at cheer, as he pulled the fur robe up round her, "and if it doesn't drift, we'll get through all right."

What they would do if it *did* drift, neither of them thought it necessary to put into words.

Though the wind did not rise, the snow was soon a white veil between them and all but the nearest trees. The beaten roads, smooth and hard as marble, over which the horses skimmed, began before long to get heavy and their progress slower. With hot bricks at her feet and her fur collar turned up so as to leave just a slit for her eyes, it was some time before the cold crept around Esther, but while she was still warm enough, she saw Dorval beating first one hand and then the other against his knees. The ponies had left off pulling now, and their bells sounded muffled.

They did not talk, for turning the head to speak or listen made cracks for the snow to sift in, and that white veil dulled their voices.

When, after a long three hours, Dorval drew rein at the lonely roadhouse amongst the woods, where they were to eat a mid-day dinner and rest the horses, the French host greeted their familiar faces with amazement, not to say disapproval.

"This is no day for lady's peekneek, Miss Esther. Me think you know that."

Esther laughed rather queerly as, stiff from inaction, she made for the open door.

"You're right, Louis. But this isn't a picnic—Mr. Dorval is taking me through to the railway."

"Mr. Dorval will stay here. He will not take you on to-day," her host announced confidently, hurrying out after Dorval to the stable.

But when the two came into the house his confidence was changed to gloom, and as they fell to on a savory meal of hare soup and moose steak with the appetite won by their long drive, he came and went with latest bulletins of the weather, and prognostications of worse to come.

Esther was guiltily reading Dorval's preoccupation through his silence, and at last made an effort to say to him:

"I don't want to be foolish about running any risks, you know. If there's really a doubt about our getting through, it would be better to stay here, wouldn't it?"

He smiled at her in the old indulgent fashion, that seemed at that moment very comforting.

"You're not afraid? You'd rather go on?" he asked, as though her wishes were the thing that mattered.

"What is there to be afraid of? Of course, I'd rather go on. Only, I don't want to do anything foolish."

"You shan't," he reassured her. "We'll start at any rate. We can always turn back."

They each silently recollected the narrow road running on for miles through the woods, with no clearing to make turning possible, but neither thought it necessary to mention the fact.

At their host's next entrance Dorval checked the latest bulletin on his lips with calm determination.

"See here, Louis. We know it's snowing, and that it's

likely to snow all night, perhaps for a week. All the more reason we shouldn't get stuck here. We're going to start in half an hour, and if we can't push through, at least to New Carlisle, we'll turn at the Joggins' cross-roads and come back. So try to put the best face on it, and give us some of that good coffee of yours, and a glass of that green *Chartrêuse* that—fell from Heaven—I mean to say, from St. Pierre."

These last significant words created such a diversion that their host beat a flustered retreat, followed by a light laugh from Esther.

This bracing of her nerves to fight the elemental forces was putting the home tragedy into the background, or rather into its right perspective in her life.

CHAPTER XXIX

OUT IN THE STORM

THEY did start, and they did reach their destination, though the early dark had already come when the smoking horses turned into the hotel yard. No need to check them now. They were as glad as strayed children to shelter from the loneliness of the coming night in the haunts of man.

And to Esther, too, stiff and chilled to the heart, the white electric light of the scattered little town, throwing long rays on the falling snow, brought an inexpressible sense of relief from that nightmare of veiled gray forest, hill upon hill climbed and descended, with no view of human habitation, not even an animal, a blank, dead world in which she and Dorval were alone, driving on to some unattainable bourne.

The sleigh bells sounded distant through the clouding snow, and when, at rare intervals, they spoke, their voices had the same lifelessness in them.

"Wait till I help you down. You'll be too stiff to move," Dorval said, as the horses stopped at the back door of the big wooden building.

"And what about you?" she returned, with a brave covering of her deadly fatigue.

"Oh, me! I'm used to it," he said, lifting her down in his arms. She was glad enough of his support, while the tingling life came back to her cramped limbs, and it

was with his arm holding hers that they entered the square lighted hall, half office, half smoking-room, and general village lounge.

The big glowing stove was encircled by men, whose casual talk flickered into silence as they turned to stare in solemn amazement at the apparition of travelers, and one a woman, on such a night.

"I expected you along, some time, Mr. Dorval, because of a wire as has come for you, but I never thought as you'd push through to-night, and as for fetching along a lady—why, Miss Sabine, that ain't never you?"

Esther heard this greeting voice of Mr. McNaughton, the landlord, as though it came from a great distance. Then, all at once, the glaring electric light, the orange glow from the stove, wavered around her, and she swayed against Dorval, who half led, half carried her into a cozy little living-room.

Here, when the vagueness cleared, she found herself in a deep rocker before the stove, while Mrs. McNaughton, a withered little woman with kind eyes, was administering hot whisky and water in sips.

"Where's Mr. Dorval?" Esther asked, bewildered.

"I just told him to leave you quiet an' I'd see to you. Mac's getting him something hot, too. He needs it, I guess," the good woman said.

Esther's heart smote her.

"Yes, he drove most of the time," she said with a new sense of indebtedness.

"For sure it was a crazy day to be starting on a journey. Mr. Dorval ought to have known that."

"It was all my fault," Esther explained apologetically. "I had to go to Boston in a hurry, and he brought me."

"Land sakes! You've never been there yet, have you?"

Gossip was as the breath of life to Mrs. McNaughton,

and she knew the family affairs of places farther up the coast than Lanse Louise.

"No, we're going on to-night to catch the Maritime at the Junction."

The good woman shook her head.

"I doubt your doing it," she said. "Afore milking-time Mr. Boggs told John the express was six hours behind time then, an' he doubted if it got through afore morning. You'll have lots of time for a rest, anyway. Look here, my girl Bessie that teaches down at Pogwock hasn't got back to-night, an' her room's just in there, nice an' warm, ready for her. You come an' lay down an' get a good sleep."

The prospect seemed infinitely alluring to Esther, stupefied with the warmth after her long drive in the frost.

Dorval, coming in just then, told the same story.

"You're sure to get a good night's rest," he said, "and that will make all the difference afterward. Anyway, I'll see you're called in plenty of time if the train's starting. You'll trust me, won't you, to do the best I can for you?"

Esther looked up at him as he stood before the fire, and though he smiled as he met her gaze, it seemed to her that his face was haggard.

"You're tired, too?" she asked.

He drew a deep breath.

"Oh, well, it's all in the day's work," he said, rather wearily. Somehow, just then she remembered the telegram that awaited him, and wondered if it came from Lanse Louise, but she did not ask. He must get so many business telegrams.

Once in bed, Esther fell into the sleep of utter exhaustion, and woke to find the sun making a glow on the frosted windows. Rather dismayed at the thought of having thus overslept herself, she hastened to dress and

join Dorval sitting over his breakfast. She had slept off yesterday's fatigues and looked her usual bright self.

Not so Dorval. In the clear morning light he looked positively ghastly.

"Oh, Mr. Dorval, aren't you well?" she gasped, forgetting the question she meant to ask about the train. The idea that he should be tired or ailing was startlingly novel.

"I had neuralgia in the night—a bad tooth," he said shortly. Then: "Come, you must make a good breakfast in preparation for a long day. Drink your coffee while it's hot."

"Yes, but the train?" Esther persisted.

"Drink some coffee, and I'll tell you."

She tried to obey, but watched him anxiously the while, and, apparently jarred by her scrutiny, he left his pretense of eating, and said, with enforced quietness:

"The train started an hour ago. We're not going on."

"And I trusted you!" she broke out. Then, impressed by a strange, smitten look in his face, she faltered with a new fear:

"There isn't . . . there's nothing happened at home?"

Silence, and his only movement was to lean his head on one hand, covering his eyes.

"Who sent you that telegram?" she demanded desperately.

"Your mother."

For an instant she was swept by a mingled sense of relief and disappointment. Their courage had failed at the last, then. She was spared her hated task, but, oh, at what a cost to pride and honor!

"They *can't* have changed their minds?" she lamented. She had spoken as much to herself as to him, but he answered without hesitation:

"No, they've not changed their minds, but . . . it's too late." The last words came slow and heavy, as though forced from him.

She did not wonder at his apparent knowledge of their family affairs. It was not the first time she had thought that he knew more of them than she did.

A canary sang his best in the window above the green plants. The sun poured into the room, and the logs crackled in the stove, but the girl shivered, for she knew.

"You must try to be brave," she heard the quiet voice say, "for you have a hard time ahead."

"It *can't* be father!" Her stiff lips hardly formed her protest against fate, but Dorval heard it, for he bowed his head.

She sprang up as though to hurry off at once.

"He's ill and wants me? He's not dead—says he's not dead!"

In her desperation she clasped his arm and shook it. Gently he took her hand in his, saying:

"Yes, it was over at once. Your mother found him dead in his chair, but . . . listen, Esther. Your mother said to tell you that he was smiling, for in his hand he held a letter from his old partner acknowledging that he had been blameless. She thinks he had read it, for she had taken it to him some time before, and she thought afterward she had heard him call her. Think, Esther, he died happy."

She drew her hand away, and sat down in silence.

It was an incongruous scene for the newness of her intimate sorrow—this big, bare hotel dining-room in the white diffused light from the snow outside.

"He died happy. He died happy," she repeated to herself meaninglessly. Somehow, she couldn't think or feel

yet. "Why didn't you tell me last night?" she demanded suddenly.

"Because we could do nothing then, and you needed the night's rest."

She knew he was right, but broke out wildly:

"I must go back. Oh, surely, you won't stop my going back now!"

"Before God, I'll do all I can," he said deeply. Then: "But if we have to wait, you'll try to be patient."

"Yes," with an appealing look. "Please, you mustn't think me horrid."

"I understand." And then he led her back to her room and left her alone.

He must have cautioned Mrs. McNaughton, for she did not come near her, and the house was very quiet.

Esther tried to feel, tried to see, but for a while she could realize nothing. Then, all at once, the worn, fragile face with its appealing smile came clear to her vision, and she wept out her grief.

Unlike Virginia, she had the daily intimate companionship of years to add to her sense of loss, but, like so few mourners, she could say to herself: "I never failed him."

It was an hour before Dorval sent to ask her to come to the sitting-room.

He took one look into the wan, grief-ravaged face, and turned away. Was he thinking of the change since her morning greeting, so short a time ago?

"The mail has managed to get through," he said, "and though the going's heavy, there are no drifts. We can start when you like. At any rate, we're sure to get as far as Mersin's to-night. You'd rather try it than stay here, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes, yes," she said with clasped hands. Then, with a sudden recollection: "But you were going on to

New York? You mustn't come back on my account. David will look after me, all right, you know."

He did not answer at once, and then she felt with a pang that she had wounded him by thus putting him outside her sorrow.

At last he spoke with careful gentleness.

"Even if I chose to let you return alone, I don't care to go on to New York just now. Your father and I knew each other for a long time, Esther."

"Thank you, I'm glad you're coming back," was all she murmured, but it seemed to content him.

She asked to see the telegram, and pored over each word as though it might reveal more to her.

As she sat there in his familiar companionship, it began to dawn on her that now she was free to put into words things she had always before dreaded to realize. Slowly the fear of shame for one so dear was passing from her, and, in its passing, leaving a sense of peace.

He was safe now from all evil.

"You knew why they came to Lanse Louise?" she asked.

"Yes, in a way, I could hardly have helped guessing something. I happened to be on board the boat they came on, and they were so helpless at first that I had to do what I could for them. You were such a little thing then, Esther."

She listened breathlessly, realizing that past as she never had before.

"I never was told the story," he went on, seeing his talk did her good, "but, of course, I could tell that, whatever it was that made him a fugitive, your father was more sinned against than sinning. Any one who knew him as long as I did, must have felt that. I'm not much in the way of texts, but there's one I used to learn as a

child that always seems to me to suit him: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' "

His voice was low and reverent, and soothed Esther like a charm.

"Oh, you always understand," she sighed.

And now Mrs. McNaughton appeared at the door, her nervous manner showing how strong had been Dorval's cautions against condolences.

"David's all ready," she said stiffly.

Presently, as Esther stood at the door, wrapped for the drive, while Dorval inspected the horses outside, the landlady put into her hand a small parcel.

"Mr. Dorval seemed to think as I'd hurt your feelin's if I said anything—me that has buried me first husband an' three children! But here's the flowers off me white geranium. It's done wonderful well this year, an' you give them to your ma with my love. Keep the box close to you under the furs an' it won't freeze."

"I will, dear Mrs. McNaughton, I will," Esther said, touched by the simple gift. She knew what each of these winter blossoms, reared in the windows, means in frost-bound homes.

They drove out into a golden, white and azure world. Each roof of the village drew a line as resplendent as Giotto's Campanile against the hard blue arch that curved cloudless overhead.

The village left behind, they entered the snow-shrouded forest as into a shrine. There had been no breath of wind as yet to shake free the bent pines and the pyramidal spruce from their fresh load, and the burdened trees seemed to form great cathedral aisles down the road vistas. This sight of Nature in her high places was infinitely grand, but on Esther's bereaved heart the wintry splendor struck austerely cruel. She would have felt

yesterday's storm a part of herself, but this chill, dazzling sunshine seemed like some tremendous opposing force with power to crush her.

With the storm, the worst sting of the frost had passed, and presently Dorval turned down his big collar a bit, saying:

"It must be fifteen or twenty above."

Few words passed between them as Dorval drove and she sat beside him. The echo of the bells through the woods, the smooth motion of the sleigh, lulled thoughts into peace.

"We're making better time than I expected. The snow's packing. I believe we'll get through to-night, after all," was Dorval's next remark.

He was right. They reached the half-way house before three, and there was no question of stopping there. After a hasty meal they started on that long last stretch, with the bereaved home-coming ever nearer. Her sorrow was no longer unreal to Esther now. The gloom of that darkened room seemed already to have engulfed her, as they drove on through the deepening glory of the short December day.

The forest shadows stretched a deeper violet over the amber of the road, the western sky faded from rose into a pale vivid green flecked with crimson cloud streaks, and then it all paled into a blue-gray world with the stars for stabs of light overhead.

It was familiar enough to Esther, the splendor of that winter panorama, and yet today it struck her with a new sense of aloofness, and in her sad heart she longed for one glimpse of the homely companionship of grass and leaves.

Even the very sea could give no friendly greeting when they skirted the shore or looked down from some hill-

crest on to the stretch of frozen bay. Its changing beauty was all hidden away under a hard covering, smooth and white as marble.

Those last hours of darkness seemed very long. A low, waning moon was sending its level rays along the forest vistas as they left the woods behind them and drove down into Lanse Louise.

Esther shuddered and pressed nearer to Dorval when they passed the little cemetery, and he, guessing her thoughts, said encouragingly:

"Your mother will be on the lookout for us about now."

Sure enough, as they swept up to the inn, against the lighted sitting-room window was outlined a black figure, staring out on the night.

"Oh, mother, mother!"

With the cry came a wonderful wave of tenderness to Esther's heart. For the time, all was forgotten save that they belonged to each other and could mourn their dead together.

Without waiting for David, as the sleigh stopped she had the bearskin unfastened, and was out and up the steps just as the door opened to enframe Mrs. Sabine's figure in orange light.

"Esther!"

"Mother!"

And Esther was clasped in her mother's arms as she had not been since childhood.

Dorval stood for a moment on the steps, watching them, then he came up, took Mrs. Sabine's hand in his, and went silently away, and the door closed on him.

It was merciful to both mother and daughter that Esther in her worn-out state could be tended like a child. After one glance at that still, white face in the death

chamber, the girl broke down, and Mrs. Sabine helped her to bed and then fed her with hot soup, murmuring: "It was enough to kill you, doing two such days together. I hoped you wouldn't come to-day, and yet I knew, I knew . . ." and she laid her cheek against the loose waves of hair with a tenderness her daughter had never known.

The next morning as Esther lay resting in bed, she pleaded: "Mother, show me the letter."

Mrs. Sabine drew the crushed paper from her dress as though it were too precious to be far from her and as Esther grasped the last thing her father's hand had touched, she kissed it, then, through her tears, read:

DEAR SABINE:

You'll wonder to hear from me after all these years, but my boy's been bullying me these last three months, and he *can* bully, for it seems his mother told him things before she died, so that ever since he wouldn't touch one note of my money. He says he's going to marry your daughter and that you and your wife still take things to heart as much as ever. So, as I feel old, and they tell me I've not much longer to live, I've given in, and am going to clear things up, so that when the boy comes back from the woods—he's the only boy I've got—he'll make friends with me before the end. It was always a marvel to me that you didn't see there was no blame on you, but it was a case of self-preservation to get you out of the way, and I knew you wouldn't go unless you were frightened into it. Once they'd got you into court, your evidence might have sent me to jail. I was sorry for you, in a way, and I'm not sure but if your fine lady wife had been less stand-offish to mine that I mightn't have tried to let you down easier. However, it's too late to think of that now. It's all an old story, and you and I are old, too. But the money I did you out of will be in the bank to your account in two days, and you can draw what you like then. Anyway, perhaps writing this will make it easier for me at the last.

The once bold signature, "Cyrus Noel" trailed off into weakness, and Esther, even while her heart burned within her for the wasted years and the dear, crushed life, felt the pitifulness of it all.

Her mother stood beside her while she read, and now, as Esther looked up at her in mute pain, she said in a low and vibrant voice:

"You see what he says. But for me, your father would have been spared."

Then, every other feeling swept away by a tide of fierce resentment, Esther cried:

"Ah, no, no! That sneer was the last crowning cruelty of a low mind. Promise me to forget it!"

A new softness came into Mrs. Sabine's eyes as she bent to kiss her daughter.

CHAPTER XXX

WEDDING BELLS

MR. SABINE'S funeral was over, and the long winter monotony closed down once more upon Lanse Louise. Axes rang in the woods, sleigh bells echoed along the smooth roads from heavily laden lumber teams, and the tracery of snowshoe tracks alone broke the white expanse of the clearings. It seemed to Virginia, in these days, that never before had she realized the solitude of winter. Immediately after the funeral Dorval had started south, and his friendly voice was missed at the Bluff House.

Worse than this was the blank when, a week or two later, on a cloudless morning, with hard-beaten roads and a full moon giving promise of good traveling, Mrs. Sabine and Esther started on the long drive to the railway junction.

"We're going to Boston, or anywhere—it doesn't much matter where, so long as I get mother away from sitting at the window, staring at the snow. Rosalie and Philip can look after the hotel," Esther said to Virginia, with an echo of determination in her voice.

As Virginia turned from watching them drive away, a great sense of isolation came over her.

All those who had made her world seemed passing out of her reach one by one, and nothing had been heard of Jack since that telegram of Noel's, sent before the snow

came. What was the North and the wilderness doing to him away off there, and why had he not managed to send her some word of his welfare? Did he know of her father's death? Was he tasting success or failure? Oh, how hard it was to know nothing, and just to wait!

Wistfully she haunted the little pink cottage, and drew what comfort she might from Mrs. LeRoy's sturdy optimism; but there were days when solitude seemed her only refuge, when she dared not disturb the mother with her fears. At these times she was wont to drive or snowshoe for miles through the silent woods, causing Miss Creighton much secret anxiety in her dread of starving wildcats or wolves.

It was the end of a still, overcast winter afternoon, comparatively mild for those regions, a few days before Christmas, when just before its sinking, the sun had broken through the western clouds, staining them and the white world below a lurid crimson.

Virginia, coming back from a drive, had passed through the long village street and by the little French Church with its big black wooden cross keeping its watch and ward gulfward, and was nearing her own gate. The solemnity of the woods, the weirdness of the red light, had helped to deepen the sense of desolation that possessed her. In the silence of that mystic twilight she felt herself to be one solitary unit in limitless space.

Her pony was tired, and she was driving carelessly with a loose rein, when she saw a man in the road ahead pause just her side of the Bluff House gate.

Now the man wore a raccoon coat, and such being the pet antipathy of Kitty, she tightened her grasp on the reins. The turn in at the gate was sharp, and she did not mean the cutter to be tipped over into the snow by any pranks of Miss Kitty's.

Hearing the bells, the man stood aside from the narrow track to let the sleigh pass. His 'coon cap was pulled low on his forehead, overshadowing his face, but the red light was full on it as he turned to look back—and it was Jack's.

For one fearsome moment she thought of his ghost seeking her with a last message from the far-off wilderness, then, as the blue eyes flashed their welcome, she knew that it was he come back to her in the flesh.

"Jack!"

"Virginia!"

Kitty gave a swerve, and floundered in the deep snow. Jack reached out an arm to catch her bridle, and Virginia called: "Don't touch her! It's the fur she hates."

"She ought to be used to it. Stand still, you brute!"

Virginia laughed helplessly; the greeting was so like Jack. As if recognizing the urgency of his grasp, Kitty did stand still, so that he was able to lean over the sleigh and take her free hand while their lips met.

"Oh, but Jack, when did you come, and why didn't you let us know?" she asked at last.

"I came ten minutes ago in the mail team, and I wanted to surprise you."

"And you did! But it's been so long, and I've been so anxious!"

"Anxious? What about?"

"Oh, everything. Those men who were trying to get the mine . . ."

Jack laughed.

"Oh, we got rid of them weeks ago. Virginia Camp is started, and the mine's doing wonders already, though nothing to what it's going to. We've each been working like twenty, but if I'd guessed you'd be anxious I'd have got a message down before the frost came. I came

away now to see about sending up machinery for the mine, and all sorts of things, though I wasn't sure if I ought to come down here, until . . ." he checked himself. Then, with lowered voice, his face close to hers:

"Virginia, I heard from the Tathems about your father. That was why I couldn't write. I couldn't say what I felt. I just had to come at once."

"But they didn't tell you the rest?" she whispered.

"What rest?"

There was a certain sharpness of dread in the words. Was anything to come between him and her now?

"That he said at the last that you were to take care of me, and that he left you half his share in the mine."

"God bless him," Jack breathed fervently.

Kitty pawed the snow restlessly at this most unpardonable delay between her and her warm stable. With this, Virginia awoke to a sudden sense of her surroundings.

"Oh, and poor Kitty hasn't even a rug on her! What will Louis say if she catches cold! And your mother, Jack! Why, she doesn't know you're here?"

"No."

"Oh, jump in quick and we'll drive across. Turn round, Kitty, you can't go to your stable yet."

To both it seemed a symbol of the new order of things when Jack got in beside her and fastened the furs around them.

"Take the reins," the girl whispered.

Jack gave the low laugh of one who is almost bewildered by happiness. He had known all through the past weeks of toil that Virginia would be loyal to him, but he had expected a long separation, a probation, perhaps, of years, and this swift entrance into possession was overwhelming.

It was marvel enough to drive at her side through the

village, past the group at the post-office, here in the sight of all their world; but once down the Bluff road and out on the stretch of frozen river, the twilight solitude enwrapped them like a rare and precious thing.

After sunset the clouds had parted in the west to open a great space of primrose sky, where a young moon sailed high. Kitty, depressed by this sudden reverse of fate, went soberly, and Jack was free to put one arm round Virginia and draw her close to him.

She breathed a little sigh of utter content.

"How unhappy I was one evening I snowshoed across here last winter, when we had no news of you," she murmured.

"And have you been unhappy lately?" he asked tenderly.

"I was anxious for you and sad for father. But, even then, it wasn't like last winter. I had your love at my heart to keep it warm."

"Please God, you'll have that to our lives' end."

One of the spruce trees, set to mark the road, brushed Jack's shoulder, scattering a handful of snow over the furs. Kitty, neglected, was avenging herself by making a devious track of her own.

In a glad revulsion of feeling, Virginia laughed out.

"You're a nice one to trust myself to!" she said.

"Well, you're going to, all the same, aren't you?" was his sturdy answer.

"Yes."

The light from the pink cottage behind the spruce trees shone out like a good deed in a naughty world, or like the steadfast heart of the old woman who had lit it. Within, the living-room seemed brimming over with warmth and savory odors, for Mrs. LeRoy had just drawn from the oven her first batch of Christmas cakes,

and stood looking proudly down on their shining brown ovals.

From the open stove came the intense red glow from a fire skillfully made of green alder branches.

"There's no fire like it for baking," Mrs. LeRoy was wont to say.

"Well, an' them cakes has come out wonderful," she mused aloud. "I don't care. I won't tell even Virginy for fear of her thinkin' me an old fool, but one of them I'll frost, an' put away in a biscuit tin till the day as Jack comes home to eat it. An' 't won't be long either, for I seed him clear last night, an' he sings out: 'I'm coming, mother,' just as he used to do when he was a little kid an' I called him in to his tea when the pollock were jumping crazy to the flies. The Lord save us! What's the matter, Czar?" she broke off sharply. The setter had left his rug by the fire to sniff at the door, whining uneasily the while.

Then she heard the crunch of a footstep on the hard snow and the opening of the outer porch door.

Flinging wide the inner one, she saw Virginia standing there, her face a rosy, smiling vision in its dark fur frame.

Steeling her heart against its charm, Mrs. LeRoy broke out into protest:

"Well, you ain't ever come over alone in the dusk, after all I've told you of the ice breakin' up suddint an' people bein' carried right out into the Gulf."

The girl seemed quite unimpressed by this caution, caressing the fawning dog and answering lightly:

"Not in December, when the Gulf's frozen for miles out. But I'm not alone. The sleigh's down at the gate."

Mrs. LeRoy was now scanning her face with a strange, new interest, realizing the change in it.

"But who's intil it?" she asked with a suddenly tremulous hand on Virginia's arm. With an ecstatic yelp, Czar dashed past Virginia, and a volley of barks sounded from the darkness.

The answering laugh was very soft.

"No one's in it, but *someone's* fastening Kitty and covering her up warm, and then he's coming up here and we're going to have tea."

"Someone! So Jack's come back?" The words were spoken with all the quiet certainty of conviction.

"Oh, you witch! How did you guess?" and Virginia was now fluttering around her, with little pats and hugs. No one in Lanse Louise but she would have dared to use the word "witch" to Mrs. LeRoy.

"I knew 'cos I'm a witch, and 'cos he came an' told me last night he was on the road. See, now, if I ain't got his cake baked."

"Oh, and how good it smells!"

Virginia hovered over the cakes, and busied herself loosening her furs, while the mother stood in the doorway and greeted her son.

"Come in and get the door shut," said Jack. "Don't you see Virginia's got her coat off?"

Mrs. LeRoy chuckled to herself at this care for the girl, while she herself faced the frost in her cotton dress. Jealousy was a thing unknown to her big heart.

Jack could not take his eyes off Virginia, who with cap and coat doffed, looked so marvelously at home in the poor little room.

"I'm going to set the table and make the toast," she announced. "Jack, your mother's been teaching me to cook, and I can bake bread and wash clothes."

But her lover, close beside her now before the stove, looked horrified at such an idea.

"Well, you're never going to have a chance to, if I can help it," he protested. "Why, we've a Frenchman up there that's as handy about the house as any woman, let alone he's got a wife that's asking nothing better than to be fetched up to the mine."

The toasting-fork Virginia held wavered down into the fire, and the slice of bread on it burned unheeded, as she turned on him, radiant with the joyful cry:

"Oh, Jack, then you're really going to take me back to the woods with you?"

Jack turned scarlet in the strife between desire and scruples.

"A winter journey would be a risky thing for you," he hesitated, "though if we fitted up a toboggan with two men to draw it, it would be light enough going on the lakes . . ."

"Of course it would!" she triumphed. "What stories you're telling! Why, you've been planning it all out! Tell me now, on your honor, haven't you got any place there I could live in?"

Scruples were gone now, and Jack's blue eyes shone with hope. "Yes, there was a good log hut finished for Noel and me before the snow came, and there's another building now," he said with a great air of impartial statement.

"Who's that for?"

"Well, we thought we'd each like one to ourselves, you know."

"To yourselves! Selfish things! Go on!" Then, with an admonitory finger: "Still, on your honor, is there any reason I shouldn't do it?"

Jack's hold on himself was gone, and he caught her in his arms. His mother had retreated to the scullery to skim the milk, and they were in possession.

"There's no reason," he breathed deeply, "when you're so brave and wonderful."

"And you'd like me to go?" she whispered.

"*Like* you?" Speech was inadequate, and he didn't try it.

"Then why are you afraid?" she persisted.

"I'm not afraid that you wouldn't be equal to anything, but . . ." he hesitated before finding words—"you're so dainty and precious, and it's rough and rude up there! But, oh, Virginia, you'd be like a queen among them all if you came!"

She laughed soft and low, her head on his breast.

"I'd love to be a queen. Let's ask your mother what she thinks."

Mrs. LeRoy, hailed, heard the case stated by the two in concert, and took no time to deliberate her answer.

Sitting down heavily in her big rocker, she announced:

"Well, it's just what I'd do meself if I were a girl, an' I know I'd never repent it. Even if you was to be cold an' hungry once in a while, which I'm sure you won't, with Jack round, there's worse things than cold an' hunger, an' that's lettin' the days of your youth go by without tastin' the good of them. You can't begin bein' happy a day too soon, to my mind."

Jack gave a shout.

"You're right, mother. We'll begin at once. Of course, I've been planning nothing else for weeks, while all the time I was afraid it was too much to ask. And, after all, it's not a question of the mine at once, for there's business to keep me more than a month in Quebec, and then I'll have to stop at St. Maudez to see the things started off up the trail, and at the St. Maudez Inn you'd be as comfortable as you would be at home. Old Guillou

will cook you wonderful dishes of game, and all his family will make much of you."

"But you'll be there always, Jack?" Virginia asked anxiously.

"I'll be up and down the trail, seeing the stuff on its way, but never for more than a day at a time, and when it's fine we'll take you along on a sled."

"I can go on snowshoes," she said proudly.

"And then, in the spring, after we're settled down, Noel will go off and fetch Esther," Jack announced with satisfaction.

"It will be just like Lanse Louise!" Then, with a sudden thought, Virginia pleaded: "Oh, but Jack, your mother must come, too!"

"Of course she must!"

The tears were rolling down the mother's face, but she shook her head bravely:

"Me! What would you do with an ignorant old thing like me when you get grand and rich up there?"

"Being grand is a long way off yet. You've got to come, mother, to teach the girls how to manage. They'd never get on without you, and you'll do the doctoring for every one. I'll get you up all right in a canoe in the spring."

A prophetic vision of future ministrations had dawned on Mrs. LeRoy, and drew her like a magnet.

"I ain't afeard of canoes," she said, "and if you'll promise to build me a little house all to myself, I'm not saying I won't come a bit later."

"You proud old thing!" said Jack, with a hand on her shoulder. He understood, and loved her fierce independence.

"We'll have Mr. Dorval up there next," Virginia chimed in gleefully. Then, in swift dismay: "Oh, but

Jack, I forgot! He's my guardian, and I can't get married without his leave, and he's away off in Egypt somewhere. Oh, what shall we do?"

"We'll cable him." Jack spoke sturdily, but there was an anxious shadow on his face.

He knew what most guardians would say to such a request. But perhaps Dorval, remembering his own youth, agreed with Mrs. LeRoy that it's best to begin to be happy as soon as one can, for the answer was favorable.

Then, on a wonderful winter morning, when the sun was turning a white bridal world into gold, a little group was gathered at the English Church to see Virginia married to Jack.

Tom Tathem and his wife had taken the long journey through, so that he might give the bride away, and she might help to dress her. Virginia's heart throbbed with pride when she saw with what frank friendship they treated Jack.

The church had donned its Christmas decoration of evergreens and red berries, and Virginia, though ready for traveling, wore under her furs the white woolen dress with the red clasps that she had on the night of her quarrel with Giles.

"Oh, aren't they lovely!" Mrs. Tom whispered to Miss Creighton, as they watched the two plighting their troth, he, in his fair, broad-shouldered bulk, with a tremor of awe on his set face, she beside him, slim and dark, a wonderful light in the soft eyes upturned to him.

At the church door waited Dorval's black ponies, with Virginia's fox-terrier perched on the front seat of the sleigh, and Czar peering out from behind, and in the glory of the morning light they set out together on their life's journey.

"Well, if it ain't like the end of a fairy-tale!" said Mrs. LeRoy, as she helped Miss Creighton into the Bluff House sleigh.

[THE END]

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